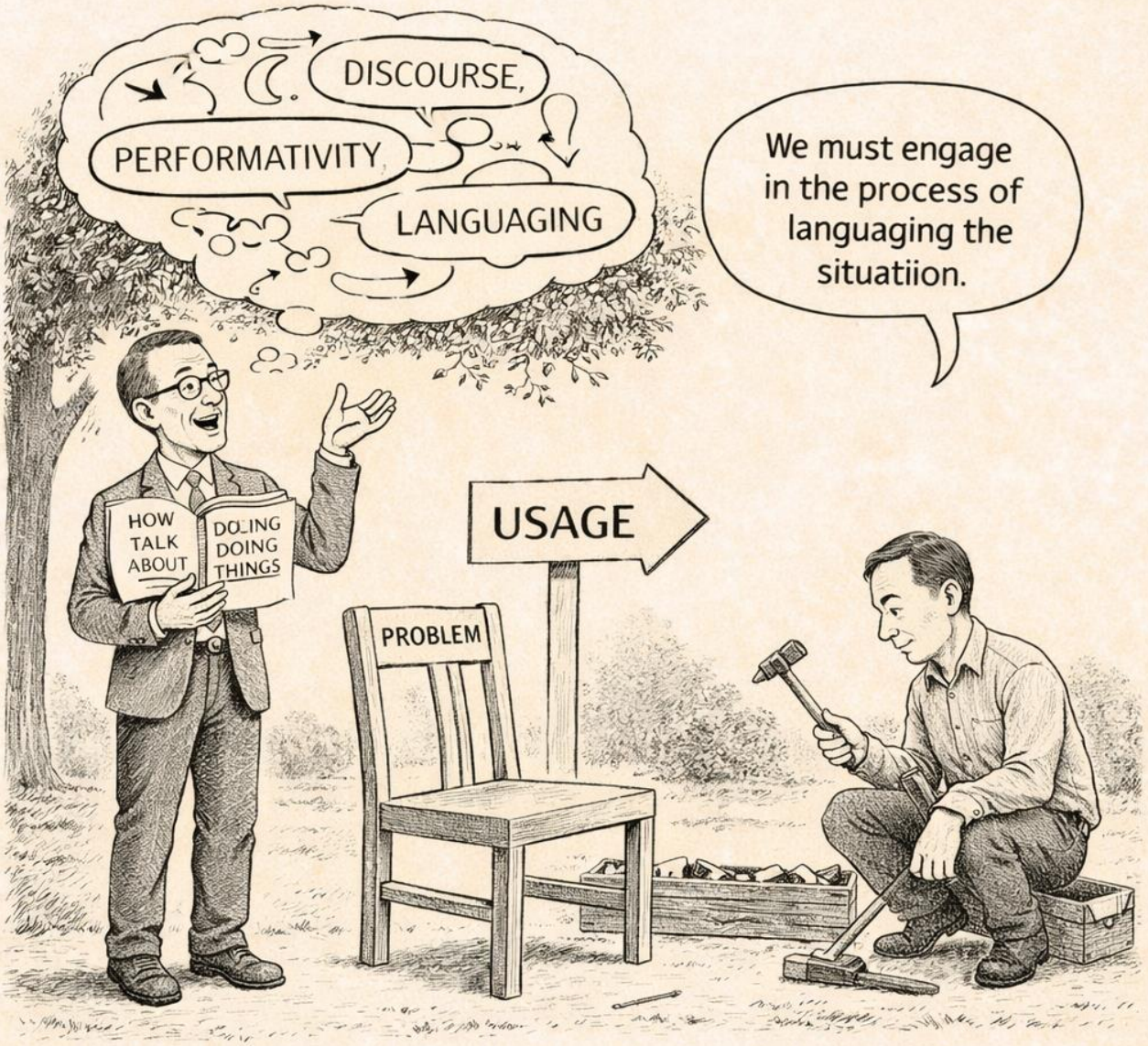
LANGUAGING AND USAGE

THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY "The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."



extended version

by Peter Ayolov

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THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY
"The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."
Part 15
(Extended version*)

LANGUAGING AND USAGE

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*(*The extended version expands the original text to accommodate a significantly larger body of material that could not be contained within a first four parts, allowing the argument to unfold with greater depth, continuity, and conceptual precision. It is written as a more comprehensive and elaborated version of the original, preserving its core structure while integrating additional analyses, examples, and theoretical developments that extend the scope of the work.)*

Introduction: The Slow Erosion of Meaning: Usage, Power, and the Planned Obsolescence of Language

This book, as part of the Miscommunication Trilogy, addresses the emerging condition of the Planned Obsolescence of Language by tracing how usage, cognition, and social structures reshape linguistic systems not through abrupt invention but through gradual transformation rooted in everyday practice. Language is not a static code nor a neutral medium; it is a living process continuously molded by repetition, context, power, and collective habits. What appears as stability is often only the temporary equilibrium of forces that are already working toward change. The notion of "languaging" foregrounds this dynamic reality: language is not merely something we possess, but something we do, something enacted in time, shaped by use, and constantly reconfigured by the pressures of communication, cognition, and culture.

I. Language as Use: From Stored Patterns to Emergent Meaning

At the foundation of any usage-based understanding of language lies the recognition that linguistic knowledge is not composed of abstract rules detached from experience, but of accumulated instances of use. Every utterance leaves a trace, strengthening certain patterns while weakening others. Over time, these traces form networks of associations that give rise to constructions, categories, and expectations. The speaker does not generate language from first principles but navigates a landscape of prior usage, selecting, adapting, and extending what has already been encountered. This perspective fundamentally alters the way we understand creativity in language. Novelty does not arise from the application of pre-existing rules to new inputs, but from analogical extension grounded in similarity to prior utterances. A new expression is acceptable not because it conforms to an abstract system, but because it resonates with familiar patterns. The gradient nature of acceptability reflects this: utterances are not simply grammatical or ungrammatical, but more or less aligned with established usage. Frequency and similarity thus become the primary determinants of linguistic legitimacy.

Crucially, this process is deeply tied to memory. Linguistic units are not isolated symbols but exemplars embedded in networks of phonological, semantic, and contextual associations. High-frequency forms gain strength and resist change, while low-frequency forms remain vulnerable to transformation or disappearance. This asymmetry introduces a conservative force within the system, preserving certain elements even as others evolve. It is precisely this tension between innovation and retention that gives language its dynamic stability. The prevalence of prefabricated sequences further underscores the centrality of usage. A significant portion of everyday speech consists not of freely generated combinations, but of chunks retrieved as wholes from memory. These prefabs range from idiomatic expressions to routine constructions, forming the backbone of fluent communication. Their existence challenges the idealized notion of infinite generative capacity by revealing the extent to which language relies on repetition and familiarity. Creativity, in this light, is not the production of entirely new forms, but the recombination and extension of existing ones.

The implications of this view extend beyond individual cognition to the collective level. As patterns are shared and reinforced within a community, they become conventionalized, acquiring a normative force. What begins as a local tendency can, through repeated use, become a defining feature of a language. Conversely, patterns that fail to achieve sufficient frequency may fade into obsolescence, regardless of their structural plausibility. Language, therefore, is shaped not by logical necessity but by the contingencies of use.

II. Analogy, Acquisition, and the Reproduction of Structure

The role of analogy in language extends from adult usage into the domain of child language acquisition, where it provides a window into the formation of linguistic structure. Children do not begin with abstract rules that they apply to linguistic input; rather, they start with specific utterances and gradually build more general patterns through processes of comparison and extension. Early speech is characterized by reliance on rote-learned expressions and lexically specific constructions, reflecting the immediate influence of the input. Empirical studies reveal that a large proportion of children's utterances can be traced directly to previously encountered forms, either as repetitions or as slight modifications achieved through simple operations such as juxtaposition and superimposition. These operations allow children to combine existing units or fill schematic slots within partially generalized constructions. The gradual increase in the complexity and variability of these operations marks the development of more abstract patterns, but this abstraction does not replace the underlying exemplars. Instead, both levels coexist, with specific instances continuing to play a role alongside more generalized schemas.

This continuity between acquisition and usage challenges the traditional view that language change originates primarily in the process of transmission across generations. While children certainly contribute to the evolution of language, the evidence suggests that change is not driven by abrupt reanalysis or radical restructuring in the child's grammar. Rather, it emerges from the cumulative effects of usage across all speakers, including adults. Variation is present at every stage, and children's productions reflect the probabilistic patterns found in the input rather than introducing entirely new structures. The gradual nature of change is particularly evident in processes such as grammaticalization, where lexical items evolve into grammatical markers through repeated use in specific contexts. This evolution is not the result of a single moment of reinterpretation, but of a series of small shifts in meaning, form, and distribution. As a construction becomes more frequent, it undergoes phonetic reduction, semantic generalization, and increased autonomy from its original context. These changes reinforce each other, creating a self-sustaining trajectory that leads to the emergence of new grammatical structures.

Importantly, these processes operate within the constraints of analogy. New forms are not created in isolation but are modeled on existing patterns, ensuring continuity within the system. Even in cases of apparent innovation, the underlying mechanism remains one of extension from prior usage. This continuity explains why language change often appears conservative, with new constructions retaining traces of their origins. It also highlights the role of frequency in shaping the direction of change: patterns that are widely used are more likely to serve as the basis for further development. The interplay between analogy and frequency thus provides a unified account of both stability and change. High-frequency forms resist alteration, preserving older patterns, while lower-frequency forms are more susceptible to analogical leveling or extension. This differential susceptibility creates a stratified system in which multiple patterns coexist, competing for dominance. The outcome of this competition is not predetermined but depends on the shifting dynamics of usage within the speech community.

III. Language, Power, and the Obsolescence of Expression

The processes described above do not occur in a vacuum; they are embedded in social contexts that shape both the form and function of language. Usage is not merely a cognitive phenomenon but a social practice influenced by power, identity, and institutional structures. The Planned Obsolescence of Language emerges precisely at this intersection, where the forces of usage are harnessed, consciously or unconsciously, to produce conditions in which certain forms of expression are marginalized, simplified, or replaced. Standardization provides a clear example of this dynamic. By promoting a particular variety of language as the norm, institutions create a

hierarchy of forms that privileges some patterns while devaluing others. This process often operates under the guise of clarity, efficiency, or correctness, but its effects extend far beyond these stated goals. By narrowing the range of acceptable expressions, standardization reduces the diversity of linguistic resources available to speakers, contributing to a gradual erosion of expressive capacity.

At the same time, the mechanisms of usage-based change amplify these effects. High-frequency patterns associated with dominant varieties gain strength and spread, while less frequent patterns associated with marginalized groups become increasingly vulnerable to loss. Over time, this imbalance leads to a homogenization of language, in which variation is not only reduced but rendered invisible. The result is a system that appears stable and coherent, but at the cost of diminished flexibility and nuance. The role of media and technology further accelerates this process. In contemporary contexts, linguistic patterns can achieve widespread distribution at unprecedented speed, reinforcing certain constructions while sidelining others. The repetition inherent in mass communication amplifies frequency effects, solidifying particular forms as default options. This environment favors simplicity and predictability, as these qualities facilitate rapid processing and broad comprehension. However, it also contributes to the narrowing of linguistic possibilities, as more complex or less familiar patterns are gradually excluded.

The concept of Planned Obsolescence of Language captures this cumulative effect. Just as products are designed to become outdated, linguistic forms can be rendered obsolete through shifts in usage that prioritize efficiency over richness. This obsolescence is not the result of deliberate design in every instance, but of systemic pressures that favor certain patterns over others. The outcome is a language that continues to function but with a reduced capacity for expressing complexity, ambiguity, and depth. Yet this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Because language is grounded in use, it remains open to change from within. Speakers retain the ability to introduce variation, to revive less frequent patterns, and to expand the range of acceptable expressions. The same mechanisms that drive obsolescence can, under different conditions, support renewal. The key lies in recognizing the role of usage not only as a force of change but as a site of agency.

Understanding language as a complex adaptive system thus provides both an explanation of its current trajectory and a framework for intervention. By tracing the interplay of cognition, culture, and use, we can identify the mechanisms that shape linguistic evolution and consider how they might be redirected. The Planned Obsolescence of Language is not simply a condition to be observed, but a process to be understood and, potentially, resisted.

1. SOCIOLONGUISTCICS

The Social Life of Speech: When Language Becomes Structure

In William Labov’s empirical studies and Basil Bernstein’s sociological theory, as well as Dell Hymes’s ethnographic framework and Charles A. Ferguson’s descriptive linguistics, language emerges not as an isolated system but as a living structure embedded in the fabric of social existence, where every utterance carries the weight of cultural expectation and historical formation. Sociolinguistics begins from a deceptively simple premise: that language is never merely spoken, but always situated. It unfolds within norms, hierarchies, and shared assumptions that shape not only how something is said, but whether it can be said at all. In this sense, language is less a neutral medium and more a field of forces, where society inscribes itself into speech, and speech in turn stabilizes or unsettles society. The relation is reciprocal, yet never symmetrical,

because language both reflects and produces the structures within which it operates. What appears as variation is therefore not deviation, but evidence of underlying social differentiation, rendered audible.

Historically, the recognition that language varies according to social conditions disrupted the earlier illusion of linguistic uniformity. Differences once attributed merely to geography were revealed to be inseparable from class, education, gender, and collective identity. Mountains and rivers may separate dialects, but so do institutions, beliefs, and expectations. Language becomes a map not only of space but of social stratification. A working-class pronunciation, a professional register, or a generational slang is not simply a linguistic feature; it is a marker of belonging, exclusion, and aspiration. The study of such variation thus transforms language into a diagnostic tool for reading society itself. What people say, and how they say it, reveals the invisible architecture of social life. The methods developed to capture this complexity reflect the necessity of approaching language as lived experience. Observation, recording, immersion, and experimentation all attempt to grasp speech in its natural context, yet each method confronts a paradox: the moment language is observed, it changes. The presence of the observer introduces a distortion, forcing speech into a self-conscious form that obscures its ordinary character. This tension does not invalidate the study, but rather exposes the fragile boundary between natural expression and social performance. Language is always, to some degree, an act, shaped by the awareness of being heard. The sociolinguistic interview, with its attempt to elicit spontaneous speech, reveals precisely this instability. The more one seeks authenticity, the more one encounters the impossibility of isolating it. The concept of the speech community provides a way to understand how language is collectively stabilized despite this variability. A speech community is not defined simply by shared vocabulary or grammar, but by shared norms of use, by an implicit agreement about what counts as appropriate speech. To belong to such a community is to possess communicative competence, the ability to navigate contexts and adjust expression accordingly. This competence is not innate but acquired through participation, through the gradual absorption of patterns that are rarely articulated explicitly. Individuals may belong to multiple communities simultaneously, shifting between them as contexts demand, which reveals that identity itself is not fixed but negotiated through language. Speech becomes the medium through which one moves between worlds.

Within these communities, the notion of practice deepens the understanding of how language and identity intertwine. Social groups are not merely collections of individuals but networks of repeated interactions, where meaning is continuously produced and reproduced. Families, professions, subcultures, and institutions all generate their own linguistic patterns, their own micro-systems of expression. These patterns are not accidental; they serve to reinforce cohesion, to mark boundaries, and to sustain a sense of shared reality. Slang, jargon, and specialized terminology emerge not as deviations from standard language, but as necessary adaptations to specific social needs. In this way, language becomes an instrument of both differentiation and solidarity, simultaneously dividing and uniting those who use it. The concept of prestige further reveals the evaluative dimension of language. Not all forms of speech are valued equally; some are elevated as standard, while others are marginalized as inferior. Yet this hierarchy is not purely linguistic, but social. A particular pronunciation or grammatical structure acquires prestige because of the social status of those who use it. The association between language and value creates a system in which speakers continuously adjust their speech, consciously or unconsciously, to align with desired identities. The distinction between high-prestige and low-prestige varieties is therefore less about correctness and more about power. Even the phenomenon of covert prestige, where non-standard forms are valued within specific groups, demonstrates that linguistic value is

always context-dependent. What is stigmatized in one setting may be celebrated in another. Social networks provide the structural conditions under which these variations are maintained or transformed. The density and multiplicity of connections influence how linguistic features spread or resist change. In tightly knit networks, where individuals interact frequently and across multiple roles, linguistic norms tend to be stable and resistant to external influence. In looser networks, variation is more likely to emerge, as speakers encounter diverse forms of expression. This dynamic illustrates that language change is not merely a matter of innovation, but of social structure. The flow of linguistic features follows the pathways of human interaction, tracing the contours of social relations.

Class remains one of the most persistent determinants of linguistic variation. The alignment between language and social class reveals not only differences in usage but differences in aspiration. Speakers may modify their speech to align with a perceived higher status, engaging in processes of adaptation that sometimes result in hypercorrection. This phenomenon exposes the tension between authenticity and aspiration, between the desire to belong and the fear of exclusion. Language becomes a site of negotiation, where individuals attempt to position themselves within a hierarchy that is both external and internalized. The variability observed across classes is therefore not simply descriptive but expressive of deeper social dynamics. The distinction between elaborated and restricted codes offers another perspective on how language reflects social organization. In contexts where roles are fixed and shared experiences are extensive, communication can rely on implicit understanding, reducing the need for explicit verbalization. In more fluid environments, where individuals must articulate their intentions clearly, language becomes more elaborate, more dependent on explicit expression. These codes are not measures of intelligence but adaptations to different social conditions. They reveal how language evolves in response to the demands placed upon it by the structures of everyday life. The implications for development are profound. Exposure to different forms of language shapes not only communication but cognition itself. When children encounter a limited range of linguistic patterns, their ability to navigate diverse contexts may be constrained. Conversely, exposure to multiple codes expands their communicative repertoire, enabling them to adapt to varying social demands. Language thus becomes a mechanism through which inequality can be reproduced or mitigated, depending on the opportunities available for linguistic engagement.

The tension between sociolinguistic perspectives and theories of universal grammar underscores a fundamental question: whether language is primarily a biological capacity or a social construct. The sociolinguistic view does not deny the existence of innate abilities, but insists that these abilities are always realized within specific social contexts. Grammar may provide the potential, but society determines its actualization. The variability observed across languages and communities challenges any attempt to reduce language to a purely universal system, emphasizing instead its dependence on historical and social conditions. Finally, the study of variation across age, gender, and context reveals the dynamic nature of language as a continuously evolving practice. Slang emerges, shifts, and disappears, marking generational boundaries. Gendered patterns of speech reflect broader social expectations and power relations. Code-switching demonstrates the flexibility of speakers as they navigate different social environments, adjusting their language to fit the situation. These phenomena illustrate that language is not static but perpetually in motion, shaped by the interplay of structure and agency. In this continuous movement, language reveals its true nature: not as a fixed system of rules, but as an ongoing process of negotiation between individuals and the societies they inhabit. Sociolinguistics, in tracing this process, exposes the profound entanglement of speech and social life, showing that to

understand language is to understand the conditions under which it is spoken, and to understand society is to listen carefully to the variations within its speech.

Labov, W. (1972) Sociolinguistic Patterns. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

The Quiet Revolution of Context: When Language Counts Itself

In Dell Hymes's foreword to Gillian Sankoff's The Social Life of Language, the significance of the work is presented not through proclamation but through a careful unveiling of its context, where the modesty of the author conceals a profound reconfiguration of how language is to be studied and understood. What appears at first as a continuation of established traditions reveals itself, upon closer inspection, as a transformation of them, not by rejection but by integration. The study of language is no longer confined to abstract systems or isolated theories, but is repositioned within the lived realities of speakers, where counting is not a mechanical act but a way of grounding language in evidence, and context is not a background but the very condition of meaning.

The intellectual landscape into which this work enters is already populated by theories, terminologies, and figures that have shaped the social study of language. Yet here, these elements are not elevated as monuments but treated as tools, instruments for engaging with specific linguistic situations. The emphasis shifts from the authority of theory to the necessity of application. Language is approached not as a closed system but as an open field, where ideas from sociolinguistics, anthropology, and discourse analysis converge in order to illuminate the particularities of speech communities. In this convergence, the fragmentation that once characterized the field begins to dissolve, replaced by a quiet assumption that such integration is not exceptional but necessary. This assumption is perhaps the most radical gesture of the work. What earlier intellectual movements had struggled to achieve through debate and division is here presented as a given. The disciplines that once stood apart—linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy—are brought together not through theoretical reconciliation but through practical necessity. The study of language in real contexts demands such plurality, because no single perspective can capture the complexity of how language functions within society. By treating this integration as normal rather than extraordinary, the work redefines the conditions of inquiry itself. It suggests that the true object of study is not language alone, but language as it is embedded in social life, shaped by political, cultural, and historical forces. Within this framework, the role of quantitative analysis acquires a new meaning. Counting is no longer opposed to interpretation but becomes its foundation. The resistance to numerical methods in the study of language is revealed as a reluctance to confront the variability and unpredictability of real speech. By insisting on empirical evidence, the work challenges preconceived notions and forces the analysis to remain accountable to the data it seeks to explain. Yet this commitment to quantification does not lead to reduction. On the contrary, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of linguistic change, one that recognizes patterns without erasing the individuality of speakers. The act of counting becomes a way of tracing the movement of language as it unfolds within specific contexts.

The contexts themselves are not abstract spaces but concrete historical and social realities. The examination of linguistic change in newly independent societies introduces a dimension that had often been neglected: the interplay between language and political transformation. When a pidgin evolves into a national language, or when an immigrant community negotiates its place within a dominant culture, language becomes a site of struggle and adaptation. It is not merely a reflection of social change but an active participant in it, shaping identities and redefining boundaries. The

study of such processes reveals that language is inseparable from the conditions of its use, that it carries within it the traces of history and the pressures of the present. What distinguishes this approach is its attention to the ongoing nature of linguistic change. Rather than viewing language as a stable system that occasionally undergoes transformation, it is understood as a process of continuous evolution. This micro-evolutionary perspective shifts the focus from large-scale historical shifts to the everyday practices through which language is constantly reshaped. Speakers are not passive carriers of linguistic structures but active agents who make choices, adapt strategies, and negotiate meanings. These choices are not arbitrary but are guided by context, intention, and social positioning. Language, in this sense, becomes a form of action, a way of navigating the complexities of social life.

The concept of style emerges as a crucial element in this process. Style is not merely a matter of aesthetic variation but a strategic dimension of language use. It reflects the ability of speakers to adjust their expression in response to different contexts, to align themselves with particular identities or to distance themselves from others. This strategic use of language echoes classical rhetorical concerns, where the effectiveness of speech depends not only on its content but on its alignment with the audience and the situation. The notion of identification, as articulated in rhetorical theory, finds here a new application, revealing how language operates as a means of establishing and negotiating social relationships. The integration of quantitative and ethnographic methods further deepens this understanding. By combining statistical analysis with immersive fieldwork, the work captures both the patterns and the meanings of linguistic variation. It acknowledges that numbers alone cannot explain language, just as observation alone cannot reveal its structure. The synthesis of these approaches allows for a more comprehensive account, one that respects the complexity of language without reducing it to a single dimension. This methodological innovation is not presented as a breakthrough but as a natural consequence of the commitment to studying language in context. The examination of multilingual environments highlights the interdependence of languages within a shared social space. In such contexts, languages do not evolve in isolation but influence one another, forming functional integrations that respond to the needs of speakers. This perspective challenges earlier models that treated languages as separate entities, emphasizing instead their interaction and mutual adaptation. The study of linguistic varieties within these environments reveals how language becomes a resource for negotiating identity, status, and belonging. It shows that linguistic change is not only a matter of internal development but also of external interaction, shaped by the dynamics of contact and coexistence.

The broader implication of this work lies in its redefinition of the relationship between language and society. By grounding linguistic analysis in social context, it demonstrates that language cannot be understood without reference to the structures within which it operates. At the same time, it reveals that these structures are themselves shaped by language, that the way people speak influences the way they perceive and organize their world. This reciprocal relationship challenges any attempt to separate language from its social environment, insisting instead on their inseparability. In this light, the work stands not as a culmination but as a beginning, a reorientation of the study of language toward a more comprehensive and grounded approach. Its significance lies not in the introduction of new concepts but in the reconfiguration of existing ones, in the quiet assertion that the study of language must be both empirical and contextual, both analytical and interpretive. By embracing the complexity of language as it is lived and practiced, it opens new possibilities for understanding how speech, society, and power are intertwined.

Sankoff, G. (1980) The Social Life of Language. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

The Communal Script of Speech: When Writing Emerges from Use

In Kasper Juffermans's article The Old Man and the Letter: Literacy and Languaging in a Modern Multiethnic Gambian Village, language is approached not as a fixed system but as an unfolding practice, where meaning arises through use, and where communication is shaped by the social conditions in which it occurs. What appears to be a simple act—the writing of a letter in a rural village—reveals itself as a complex event in which language, literacy, and social relations intersect. The ordinary becomes analytically significant because it exposes how linguistic practices are embedded in everyday life, where even the smallest communicative act carries the weight of cultural norms, historical influences, and social expectations.

The shift toward understanding language as languaging marks a decisive transformation in sociolinguistic thought. Instead of treating languages as bounded systems that individuals possess, this perspective emphasizes the active process through which people use available linguistic resources to achieve specific goals. Language is no longer a static code but a dynamic repertoire, shaped by context and constantly reorganized in practice. In such a view, multilingualism is not simply the coexistence of separate languages, but a condition in which speakers draw from multiple sources, combining and adjusting features in ways that respond to immediate communicative needs. This polylingual reality challenges the notion of complete mastery of a language, replacing it with the idea of flexible competence grounded in use. Within the Gambian village, this perspective finds a clear and compelling expression. The community is characterized by linguistic diversity, where several languages coexist and fulfill different roles. Mandinka functions as a shared medium of communication, yet it does not dominate to the exclusion of others. Languages such as Fula, Wolof, and others circulate alongside it, each associated with particular social contexts and relationships. English, however, occupies a distinct position, not as a language of daily interaction but as a language of formal writing and institutional recognition. Its authority does not derive from its local use but from its association with broader structures of power, education, and administration. The letter-writing event illustrates how these linguistic layers converge in practice. An elderly man, unable to write, initiates a communicative act that requires entry into a domain governed by written norms. His intention—to secure resources for arranging a marriage—demands a form of communication that carries formal weight, and this requirement dictates the use of English. The choice of language is not based on familiarity or convenience, but on its perceived legitimacy within a wider social framework. Writing becomes a bridge between local intention and institutional expectation, translating oral meaning into a form that can be recognized beyond the immediate community.

This translation, however, is not an individual achievement. It is a collective process in which different participants contribute distinct forms of knowledge. The elderly man provides the purpose and the content of the message, rooted in local social practices and obligations. The younger, literate assistant provides the technical ability to render this content into written English, drawing on his education and experience. Others observe, listen, and implicitly validate the interaction. The act of writing thus becomes distributed across participants, demonstrating that literacy, in this context, is not a solitary skill but a shared resource. It exists within relationships, activated through cooperation rather than possessed by individuals alone. Such a configuration challenges conventional definitions of literacy as an individual competence. Instead, literacy appears as a socially organized practice, shaped by access, necessity, and collaboration. The written form produced in this event reflects external norms associated with formal communication, yet its content remains grounded in local oral traditions. This duality reveals the layered nature of literacy, where global and local influences intersect. The written text is neither entirely external nor entirely internal to the community; it is a hybrid form that emerges from the interaction

between different linguistic and social domains. The process surrounding the letter is as significant as the letter itself. The careful drafting, the attention to formality, and the use of polite expressions all indicate the seriousness of the act. Writing is treated not as a routine task but as an event requiring precision and respect. Even without direct access to the full text, the interactions involved in its production provide insight into how language functions within the community. The emphasis shifts from the product to the practice, from what is written to how writing is achieved. This perspective aligns with an ethnographic approach that prioritizes lived experience over abstract representation.

At a deeper level, the event exemplifies the continuous evolution of language through use. Each act of communication involves choices, adjustments, and negotiations that contribute to the ongoing transformation of linguistic practices. The participants do not simply reproduce established forms; they adapt them to fit their needs, creating new configurations in the process. Language change, in this sense, is not confined to large historical shifts but occurs at the level of everyday interaction. It is a micro-evolutionary process, driven by the practical demands of communication and the creative capacities of speakers. The concept of repertoire becomes central in understanding this process. Speakers are not defined by their command of a single language, but by the range of resources they can mobilize. These resources are partial, uneven, and context-dependent, reflecting the diverse experiences and interactions that shape linguistic competence. The ability to navigate this repertoire—to select, combine, and adapt features appropriately—is what enables effective communication. Competence is thus redefined as flexibility, as the capacity to respond to the demands of different situations rather than to conform to a fixed standard. The ethnographic setting of the village further underscores the importance of context in shaping language use. The community is not isolated but connected to broader social and historical processes, including colonial legacies and contemporary state structures. These influences are reflected in the distribution of languages and in the values attached to them. English, for example, carries institutional authority, while local languages sustain everyday interaction. The interaction between these layers produces a complex linguistic environment in which communication is always situated, always responsive to multiple pressures.

Ultimately, the significance of this analysis lies in its demonstration that language and literacy are inseparable from the social conditions in which they are practiced. The letter written in the village is not merely a means of conveying information; it is a manifestation of social relations, a negotiation between local practices and external expectations. It reveals that even the most ordinary acts of communication are structured by complex dynamics, where language serves as both a tool and a site of social organization. In this sense, the study of languaging becomes a study of human activity itself, showing how meaning is produced, shared, and transformed within the fabric of everyday life.

Juffermans, K. (2013) The Old Man and the Letter: Literacy and Languaging in a Modern Multiethnic Gambian Village. Tilburg: Tilburg University.

The Empire of Speech: When Language Becomes Power

In Alastair Pennycook's The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, the global spread of English is revealed not as a neutral linguistic development but as a deeply political and cultural process, embedded in histories of domination, resistance, and inequality, where language operates as both an instrument of power and a site of struggle. The illusion that English simply emerged as a convenient global medium dissolves under closer examination, replaced by a

recognition that its expansion is inseparable from imperial histories, economic systems, and ideological formations that continue to shape the contemporary world. What appears as a language of connection is equally a language of division, marking access and exclusion, privilege and marginality.

The symbolic contrast between a formal global greeting transmitted into space and a protest song emerging from a marginalized community captures the dual existence of English in the modern world. In one instance, it speaks as the voice of humanity, presenting itself as universal, inclusive, and representative. In another, it carries the traces of violence, displacement, and imposed identity, revealing the costs of that universality. These two expressions are not contradictions but reflections of the same phenomenon, demonstrating that English functions simultaneously as a language of authority and a language of resistance. Its global presence does not erase difference; it reorganizes it, placing speakers within structures that privilege certain forms of expression while suppressing others. To speak a language, as suggested by earlier critical thought, is never a purely technical act. It involves entering a cultural framework, adopting ways of seeing and being that extend beyond vocabulary and grammar. English, in this sense, carries with it a particular historical weight, a set of assumptions about knowledge, progress, and modernity that shape how it is used and understood. The spread of English is therefore not simply the spread of a tool, but the diffusion of a worldview, one that often aligns with Western models of power and organization. This diffusion is not uniform; it is mediated by local conditions, producing diverse forms of engagement that reflect both acceptance and resistance. The narrative that English has become a natural and beneficial global language obscures the mechanisms through which it has achieved its dominance. The expansion of English has been closely tied to colonial administration, global trade, and the development of international institutions. These processes have positioned English as a language of authority, linking it to access to education, employment, and political participation. In many contexts, the ability to use English determines one’s position within social hierarchies, creating divisions that mirror broader inequalities. The language becomes a gatekeeper, regulating entry into domains of power while excluding those who lack access to its norms.

This gatekeeping function is particularly visible in educational systems, where English often serves as the medium through which knowledge is transmitted and validated. Students are required not only to learn content but to do so through a linguistic framework that may be distant from their everyday experience. This creates a double burden, where linguistic competence becomes a prerequisite for intellectual recognition. The result is a stratification of opportunity, where those who command English gain access to resources and mobility, while others are marginalized. The promise of global communication thus conceals a structure of inequality, where language functions as a filter rather than a bridge. The discourse surrounding English as an international language frequently avoids these political dimensions, focusing instead on issues of standardization, intelligibility, and variation. While such concerns are not without importance, they risk reducing the study of English to a technical problem, detached from the social realities in which it operates. By treating English as a neutral medium, this discourse neglects the ways in which it is implicated in systems of power. The recognition of multiple varieties of English, while seemingly inclusive, does not necessarily address the inequalities that shape their use. It may even reinforce them, by legitimizing diversity without challenging the structures that produce disparity. In postcolonial contexts, the role of English becomes even more complex. It is both a legacy of colonial rule and a resource for navigating contemporary global systems. This duality creates tensions, as English is simultaneously embraced and resisted. It offers opportunities for social mobility and participation in global networks, yet it also reinforces the dominance of external cultural models. The use of English in such contexts is therefore never neutral; it is always charged with meanings

that reflect historical experiences and present conditions. Speakers engage with the language not as passive recipients but as active agents, reshaping it to express local identities and concerns.

This process of appropriation demonstrates that English is not a monolithic entity but a flexible resource that can be reconfigured in different contexts. Local forms of English emerge, reflecting the interaction between global influences and local practices. These forms challenge the idea of a single standard, revealing the multiplicity inherent in the language's global presence. At the same time, they highlight the limits of resistance, as the use of English often remains tied to structures of power that cannot be easily transformed. The language becomes a site of negotiation, where speakers balance the demands of global participation with the desire for local expression. The relationship between English and global media further amplifies its political significance. As a dominant language in international broadcasting, English shapes the representation of events, influencing how they are perceived and understood. The framing of news, the selection of narratives, and the dissemination of information are all mediated through linguistic choices that reflect particular perspectives. This mediation extends the reach of English beyond direct communication, embedding it within the processes that construct global knowledge. The language becomes not only a means of describing the world but a tool for shaping it. The persistence of English as a global language raises fundamental questions about the future of linguistic diversity and social equality. If the dominance of English continues unchecked, it risks marginalizing other languages and the cultural practices they sustain. Yet the complete rejection of English is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable, given its role in facilitating communication across diverse contexts. The challenge lies in critically engaging with the language, recognizing its implications, and seeking ways to mitigate its inequities. This requires a shift from uncritical acceptance to reflective practice, where the use of English is accompanied by an awareness of its historical and political dimensions.

In this sense, the study of English becomes inseparable from the study of power. It reveals how language operates within systems of domination and resistance, how it shapes and is shaped by the forces that structure social life. The global spread of English is not a simple story of linguistic expansion, but a complex process that reflects the contradictions of the modern world. It embodies both the possibility of connection and the reality of inequality, reminding us that language is never merely a medium, but always a participant in the struggles that define human experience.

Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

The Burden of Meaning: When Language Becomes the World

In Alastair Pennycook's The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, the notion of the "worldliness" of English emerges as an attempt to move beyond simplistic accounts of linguistic expansion and toward a deeper engagement with the entanglement of language in social, cultural, and political realities. The problem is not merely to describe how English spreads, nor to produce a unified theory that explains its global presence, but to confront the difficulty of understanding what it means for a language to be bound up with the structures that organize human life. English does not exist alongside these structures as a separate entity; it is woven into them, shaping and being shaped by the inequalities, ideologies, and histories that define the modern world.

The question, then, is not whether language is connected to society, but how this connection is to be understood without reducing one to the other. To treat language as a passive reflection of social

forces is to strip it of agency, yet to isolate it as an autonomous system is to ignore the conditions that give it meaning. The challenge lies in holding these dimensions together, recognizing that language operates within a network of relations that cannot be easily disentangled. To speak is not simply to use a structure, but to participate in a form of life, to assume a position within a cultural and historical field that extends beyond the immediate act of communication. Language carries with it habits of thought, patterns of perception, and orientations toward the world that are neither neutral nor accidental. This insight disrupts the assumptions of much mainstream linguistic theory, particularly those grounded in structuralist traditions. By focusing on language as an abstract system, these approaches have often neglected the lived realities of speakers, reducing language to a set of formal properties detached from context. Even when social dimensions are acknowledged, they are frequently confined to separate domains, categorized as sociolinguistic or psychological phenomena, thereby preserving the division between language and its environment. Such categorizations limit the scope of inquiry, preventing a fuller understanding of how language functions as an active force within society. To move beyond these limitations requires a rethinking of the very concept of language. The idea of a unified, homogeneous language begins to dissolve when confronted with the diversity of actual linguistic practices. What is called a language is revealed to be a construct, sustained by social agreement rather than linguistic coherence. Speakers who identify as belonging to the same language community may use forms that are mutually unintelligible, yet the notion of unity persists because it serves social and political purposes. In the case of English, this fiction becomes particularly powerful, as it supports the idea of a global language while obscuring the inequalities that structure its use.

The discourse of linguistic equality, which suggests that all varieties of English are equally valid, masks the hierarchical reality in which some forms carry greater authority than others. Standardized varieties, associated with education, governance, and economic power, dominate over local forms, which are often marginalized or stigmatized. The claim of equality thus becomes a means of concealing inequality, presenting a harmonious image that fails to account for the distribution of power within the linguistic landscape. English, in its global form, is not a neutral medium but a stratified system in which different varieties occupy different positions. The critique of language as a transparent reflection of thought further complicates the picture. Language does not simply mirror reality; it participates in its construction. It shapes the way people perceive, categorize, and respond to the world. This process is not static but dynamic, as language is continuously renewed through use. Each act of speaking or writing contributes to the ongoing transformation of linguistic practices, reflecting both individual agency and collective structures. Language becomes a site where identity is enacted, negotiated, and contested, rather than a fixed repository of meaning. The idea of linguistic behavior as acts of identity underscores this point. Speakers do not merely use language; they position themselves through it, aligning with certain groups, distancing themselves from others, and expressing affiliations that are both personal and social. These acts are shaped by broader forces, including nationalism, standardization, and the desire for coherence within communities. The formation of languages as bounded entities is closely tied to these forces, reflecting efforts to impose order on the variability of human communication. Yet this order is always provisional, subject to the pressures of change and the diversity of lived experience.

In this context, the concept of worldliness offers a way to understand language as embedded in the world rather than detached from it. Language is not an abstract system hovering above reality, nor is it reducible to the material conditions in which it is used. It exists in the interplay between these dimensions, shaped by and shaping the contexts in which it operates. To analyze language in this way is to attend to its connections, to trace the ways in which it is implicated in systems of power,

culture, and knowledge. English, as a global language, exemplifies this condition, as its forms and uses are inseparable from the histories and structures that have enabled its spread. The implications of this perspective are far-reaching. To speak English is not simply to communicate; it is to engage with a set of relations that extend across local and global contexts. It involves navigating the expectations and constraints associated with the language, as well as the opportunities it provides. The use of English connects speakers to wider discourses, linking their local practices to global systems of meaning. This connection is not uniform; it varies according to context, reflecting the uneven distribution of power and resources. Ultimately, the worldliness of English reveals that language cannot be understood in isolation from the conditions of its existence. It is a cultural and political phenomenon, shaped by the forces that structure the world and contributing to their reproduction. The spread of English is therefore not a neutral process but a manifestation of these forces, carrying with it the inequalities and contradictions that define the modern era. To study English in this light is to recognize that language is not merely a means of expression, but a participant in the ongoing construction of the world itself.

Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

The Illusion of the Global: When Language Maps Inequality

In Alastair Pennycook's The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, the concept of the "international" is subjected to a critical reexamination, revealing that what is often taken as a neutral descriptor of global connection is in fact deeply embedded in asymmetries of power, discourse, and control. The idea that the world is becoming smaller, more connected, and more accessible appears at first as a benign observation, yet beneath this optimism lies a structured movement of people, capital, and information that follows unequal paths. The language through which this shrinking world is narrated—most often English—does not merely describe global relations but actively participates in shaping them, defining who speaks, who is heard, and who remains marginal. The rhetoric of internationalism often relies on a quiet assumption of shared participation, as if global exchange were evenly distributed across nations and peoples. Yet the reality suggests otherwise. The circulation of information tends to move from economically dominant regions outward, while resources and labor often flow in the opposite direction. This imbalance produces a world in which communication appears universal but is in fact highly directional. The institutions that promote international dialogue, from global media networks to professional organizations, frequently operate within this uneven structure, reinforcing rather than challenging it. The language of inclusion masks the persistence of exclusion, allowing inequality to persist under the guise of connectivity.

To question the meaning of the international is therefore to confront the structures that sustain it. The assumption that global communication is inherently beneficial obscures the conditions under which it occurs. When conferences, institutions, and media platforms are predominantly shaped by wealthier nations, the voices that dominate these spaces are not representative of a global collective but of specific centers of power. The language used in these contexts becomes a medium through which authority is exercised, setting the terms of discussion and determining what counts as legitimate knowledge. English, in this sense, is not simply a shared tool but a gatekeeper that regulates participation in global discourse. The historical frameworks that have attempted to explain global relations further illuminate this dynamic. The transition from classical debates about human nature and conflict to postwar theories of development introduced a narrative of progress that positioned societies along a linear path from traditional to modern. This narrative, often

framed through modernization theory, suggested that disparities between nations could be resolved through the adoption of certain economic and cultural practices. Language and education were central to this process, as they were seen as vehicles for transmitting the values associated with modernity. The expansion of mass media and educational systems was thus interpreted as a means of accelerating development, fostering new forms of awareness and aspiration. Yet this vision of progress concealed a deeper structure of dependency. Critical perspectives emerged to challenge the assumption that development was a neutral or universally beneficial process, arguing instead that the global system was organized in such a way that the advancement of some regions depended on the continued subordination of others. Within this framework, the flow of communication and knowledge was not a simple exchange but a mechanism through which dominance was maintained. Educational systems and media networks, far from being neutral conduits, functioned as instruments that reproduced the values and interests of dominant powers. The language through which these systems operated became part of this process, embedding particular ways of thinking within the practices of everyday life.

The role of English within this system cannot be separated from these dynamics. As the primary language of international communication, it carries with it the assumptions and structures of the contexts in which it has developed. Its global presence is not merely a consequence of its utility but of the historical forces that have elevated it to this position. The use of English in education, media, and diplomacy reinforces its status as a language of authority, shaping the conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. For those outside the centers of power, access to English becomes both a necessity and a constraint, offering opportunities for participation while simultaneously imposing limits on expression. The interplay between communication and dependency reveals that language is not an external addition to global systems but a central component of their operation. The dissemination of information through dominant languages influences how reality is perceived and understood, shaping the frameworks through which people interpret their circumstances. Cultural production, media representation, and educational content all contribute to this process, reinforcing particular narratives while marginalizing others. The result is a world in which the diversity of experience is filtered through a limited set of perspectives, creating a form of homogenization that coexists with, and often obscures, underlying inequalities. To address these issues requires a shift in perspective, one that recognizes culture, language, and discourse as active forces rather than passive reflections of economic structures. Power is not only exercised through material means but also through the control of representation, through the ability to define meanings and shape narratives. Language plays a crucial role in this process, as it provides the medium through which these representations are articulated and disseminated. The study of global relations must therefore account for the ways in which discourse contributes to the maintenance or transformation of power structures.

The persistence of inequality in a world that claims to be increasingly interconnected challenges the optimism often associated with globalization. The coexistence of technological advancement and extreme poverty, of global communication and local marginalization, reveals the contradictions inherent in contemporary international relations. Language, situated within these contradictions, becomes a site where these tensions are both expressed and negotiated. The spread of English, far from resolving these tensions, reflects and amplifies them, embodying the complexities of a world in which connection does not guarantee equality. In this light, the concept of internationalism must be rethought not as a neutral framework but as a contested space, shaped by competing interests and uneven distributions of power. The language that operates within this space cannot be understood apart from these conditions. English, as the dominant medium of global discourse, participates in the construction of this space, influencing how it is imagined and

experienced. To engage critically with the global role of English is therefore to engage with the broader dynamics of inequality, dependency, and representation that define the modern world.

Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

The Game of Empire: When Language Plays Power

In Alastair Pennycook's The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language, the relationship between language and global power is illuminated through an unexpected yet revealing parallel with the history of cricket, where both language and sport emerge as cultural forms deeply entangled with imperial expansion, resistance, and the ongoing struggle over meaning. What appears as a leisure activity or a neutral medium of communication reveals itself, under closer scrutiny, as a terrain in which power is exercised, contested, and reconfigured. The spread of cricket alongside the British Empire mirrors the diffusion of English, not merely as a coincidence, but as part of a broader cultural project that sought to shape subjectivities and impose particular forms of order.

Cricket functioned as more than a game; it was a mechanism through which imperial values were transmitted and embodied. It cultivated discipline, hierarchy, and a reverence for the structures of authority that defined colonial rule. The participation of colonized elites in this system, particularly those who were educated in imperial institutions and later represented the empire itself, reveals the complexity of colonial identity. These figures were not simply passive recipients of imperial culture, but participants in its reproduction, embodying both admiration and contradiction. Their presence exposed the tensions within colonial discourse, where inclusion was possible only through assimilation into dominant norms. Yet the trajectory of cricket did not remain confined to its imperial origins. As colonial structures were challenged and dismantled, the game became a site of transformation, reflecting broader struggles for autonomy and recognition. Players and communities who had once been positioned at the margins began to redefine the meaning of the sport, turning it into an expression of collective identity and resistance. The evolution of cricket from an instrument of domination into a medium of assertion demonstrates that cultural forms are not fixed but can be appropriated and reimagined. What was once imposed can become a resource for self-definition, a means of articulating alternative narratives that challenge the authority of the center. This transformation is not without tension. The persistence of racial hierarchies and discriminatory practices within the sport reflects the enduring influence of the structures from which it emerged. Moments of victory and recognition coexist with experiences of marginalization and exclusion, illustrating that the process of decolonization is uneven and incomplete. The reactions of dominant institutions, particularly in moments when established hierarchies are disrupted, reveal the depth of these tensions. The cultural politics of cricket thus provide a vivid illustration of how power operates not only through economic and political systems, but through everyday practices and symbolic forms.

The parallel with English becomes increasingly apparent within this framework. Like cricket, English was disseminated as part of an imperial project, carrying with it the values and assumptions of the contexts in which it developed. Its global spread cannot be understood solely in terms of utility or efficiency; it is inseparable from the historical processes that have positioned it as a language of authority. Yet, as with cricket, the use of English has not remained under the exclusive control of its original centers. It has been appropriated, reshaped, and reinterpreted by those who engage with it in diverse contexts. This process reveals that language, like culture, is a

site of negotiation, where meanings are not imposed unilaterally but are continuously contested. The emphasis on discourse further deepens this understanding. Discourses operate as systems that organize knowledge and define what can be said, shaping perceptions of concepts such as development, democracy, and freedom. They do not merely reflect reality but participate in its construction, influencing how individuals and societies interpret their experiences. English, as a dominant medium of global discourse, plays a central role in this process, mediating the circulation of ideas and reinforcing particular frameworks of understanding. Its influence extends beyond communication, embedding itself in the structures through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. At the same time, the recognition of culture as a field of struggle challenges any deterministic view of language as an inherently oppressive force. While English is implicated in systems of inequality, it is also a resource that can be used in ways that resist and transform those systems. The rejection of determinism is crucial in this regard, as it allows for the acknowledgment of human agency and the possibility of change. To view the spread of English solely as an instrument of domination is to overlook the ways in which it has been used to articulate alternative identities and to challenge existing power relations. Language is not simply imposed; it is taken up, reworked, and redirected.

This perspective also calls into question approaches that focus exclusively on planning and regulation. While efforts to protect linguistic diversity and promote equitable language policies are important, they cannot fully address the complexities of discourse and cultural practice. Language cannot be reduced to a system that can be engineered or controlled; it exists within a network of meanings that exceed formal structures. The task, therefore, is not only to manage language but to engage critically with the contexts in which it operates, to understand how it participates in the construction of social realities. The role of teaching becomes particularly significant within this framework. Educators are positioned at the intersection of language and discourse, where they can either reinforce existing structures or open spaces for critical engagement. A pedagogical approach that recognizes the worldliness of English seeks to make visible the connections between language and power, encouraging learners to reflect on the implications of their linguistic practices. Such an approach does not reject English but situates it within a broader context, allowing for multiple forms of meaning-making and the possibility of resistance. Ultimately, the comparison between cricket and English reveals that cultural forms are never neutral. They are shaped by histories of power and struggle, yet they also provide opportunities for transformation. The global presence of English, like the global reach of cricket, reflects the complexities of a world in which domination and resistance are intertwined. To understand this presence is to recognize that language is not merely a medium of communication, but a field in which the dynamics of culture, identity, and power are continuously negotiated.

Pennycook, A. (1994) The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language. London: Longman.

The Patterned Bond: When Language Mirrors Society

In Joshua A. Fishman's introduction to Readings in the Sociology of Language, the relationship between language and society is reframed as a structured co-variation, where neither domain can be fully understood in isolation, and where the patterns of one illuminate the patterns of the other. What had long been recognized separately—the diversity of linguistic forms and the stratification of social structures—is here brought into a shared analytical space, revealing that variation in language is not random but systematically aligned with variation in social life. This alignment is

not incidental; it reflects the fundamental condition that language is both shaped by and constitutive of social interaction.

Language, when examined closely, reveals itself as internally differentiated across multiple dimensions. It exists not only as distinct languages but as a range of dialects, registers, and styles, each corresponding to particular contexts of use. These forms may differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or meaning, yet their variation follows recognizable patterns. Similarly, society is not a homogeneous entity but a layered structure composed of interactions at different scales, from intimate exchanges between individuals to the complex relations of large groups and nations. These social formations exhibit their own forms of organization, governed by roles, norms, and expectations that shape behavior. The crucial insight lies in recognizing that these two domains—linguistic and social—are interdependent, each providing a framework for understanding the other. The sociology of language emerges from this recognition as an inquiry into the patterned relationships between linguistic behavior and social organization. It does not treat language as a self-contained system, nor society as a background against which language operates, but as interconnected processes that co-evolve. When speakers choose particular forms of expression, these choices are not arbitrary; they are informed by the social meanings attached to those forms. A variant may signal formality, regional identity, or social status, just as the structure of a social interaction—whether between individuals, groups, or institutions—shapes the expectations placed upon communication. Language thus becomes a medium through which social distinctions are both expressed and maintained. The preference for the term “sociology of language” over “sociolinguistics” reflects an effort to emphasize the broader context in which language operates. While both terms address the intersection of language and society, the former foregrounds the primacy of social structure as the encompassing framework within which linguistic behavior is situated. This perspective does not deny the importance of linguistic analysis, but situates it within a wider inquiry into social processes. Language is seen not merely as an object of study but as a dimension of social life, embedded in the patterns of behavior that define communities.

As an emerging field, the sociology of language necessarily draws upon the methods and concepts of both linguistics and sociology. This borrowing is not a limitation but a stage in the development of a more integrated approach. The eventual goal is to move beyond the boundaries of these disciplines, developing a set of concepts and methods that reflect the unique character of the field. Such an integration requires overcoming the historical separation between linguistics and sociology, a separation rooted in differing priorities and methodologies. Linguistics, particularly in its formal traditions, has often focused on language as an autonomous system, abstracted from its social context. Sociology, on the other hand, has tended to prioritize large-scale structures and quantitative analysis, often neglecting the role of language in shaping social interaction. The gradual convergence of these disciplines reflects changes within both fields. As sociology has turned its attention toward small-group dynamics and processes of social change, it has become more receptive to the study of language as a key element of social behavior. At the same time, linguistics has begun to recognize that variation once considered random may in fact reflect underlying social patterns. This mutual shift creates the conditions for a more comprehensive understanding of language and society, one that acknowledges the importance of both structure and interaction.

The potential contributions of this integration are significant. Sociologists can use linguistic data as indicators of social relationships, gaining insight into patterns of interaction, group membership, and social change. Linguists, in turn, can benefit from sociological perspectives that reveal the

social motivations underlying linguistic variation. Categories such as age, ethnicity, education, and occupation, often used to classify social groups, can be reinterpreted as reflections of patterns of behavior that are themselves mediated through language. By incorporating these insights, the study of language becomes more attuned to the realities of social life. The sociology of language thus positions itself as a bridge between disciplines, offering a framework for understanding the interplay between linguistic and social phenomena. It moves beyond simple categorization, seeking to uncover the processes through which language and society influence one another. This approach recognizes that language is not merely a tool for communication but a central component of social organization, shaping and reflecting the structures within which it is used. Given its developmental stage, the field resists rigid conceptual frameworks, favoring instead an openness to diverse approaches and methods. The inclusion of both theoretical and empirical studies reflects this commitment to plurality, acknowledging that no single perspective can capture the complexity of the subject. The aim is not to impose uniformity but to encourage exploration, to provide a foundation upon which future research can build.

Ultimately, the sociology of language reveals that the connection between language and society is not a peripheral concern but a central feature of human life. It shows that the patterns of speech and the patterns of social interaction are deeply intertwined, each offering insight into the other. By attending to this relationship, the field opens new possibilities for understanding how meaning is produced, how identities are formed, and how social structures are maintained and transformed. In doing so, it affirms that language is not merely a reflection of society, but one of the primary means through which society comes into being.

Fishman, J. A. (1972) Readings in the Sociology of Language. The Hague: Mouton.

The Social Voice of Use: When Language Follows Its Speakers

In Joshua A. Fishman's discussion The Users and Uses of Language from Readings in the Sociology of Language, the focus shifts from language as an abstract system toward language as a practice shaped by those who use it, where meaning is inseparable from the social contexts in which it is produced. Description alone, however precise, cannot account for the full reality of language, because language does not exist independently of its speakers. It lives within communities, within interactions, and within the purposes that guide communication. To understand language, one must therefore turn to its users, to the conditions under which it is spoken, and to the functions it serves.

This perspective introduces a reorientation from structure to use, from form to function. While descriptive approaches categorize language according to its internal features, the study of users and uses examines how language operates within social life. The distinction is not trivial, for it reveals that language cannot be fully explained by its grammar or vocabulary alone. It must also be understood as a tool through which individuals navigate their social world, express identity, and fulfill practical needs. Language becomes not merely a system to be analyzed but an activity to be observed, where each utterance is shaped by intention, context, and relationship. Central to this approach is the concept of the language community, which is defined not simply by shared linguistic forms but by a shared sense of belonging. A community exists where individuals recognize themselves as participants in a common linguistic practice, even when the forms they use differ. This recognition is not always grounded in mutual intelligibility, as seen in cases where speakers of distinct varieties still identify with a single language. The notion of a unified language, therefore, is less a linguistic fact than a social construct, sustained by collective perception and

reinforced by cultural and historical factors. Language communities are formed not only through speech but through the meanings attached to that speech, through the identities that it supports. Within such communities, variation is inevitable and structured. Differences in language may arise from geographical location, social class, or cultural affiliation, producing what are commonly referred to as dialects. These variations reflect the backgrounds of speakers, marking their position within a social landscape. At the same time, language varies according to use, giving rise to registers that correspond to specific contexts and purposes. The distinction between dialect and register reveals two dimensions of linguistic variation: one tied to the speaker, the other to the situation. Together, they demonstrate that language is continuously adjusted to meet the demands of both identity and context.

The interaction between language communities further complicates this picture. When groups come into contact, their languages influence one another, producing forms of bilingualism that range from partial competence to near-equal mastery. Yet even in cases of high proficiency, languages are rarely used interchangeably across all domains. Instead, they tend to occupy different functional spaces, each associated with particular activities or relationships. This distribution reflects the practical organization of social life, where language choice is guided by context rather than by abstract equivalence. Bilingualism, therefore, is not simply the coexistence of two languages within an individual, but a structured pattern of use shaped by social needs. In some cases, sustained contact between languages leads to the emergence of new forms, such as pidgins and creoles. These forms illustrate the creative capacity of speakers to develop systems that meet their communicative requirements under specific conditions. What begins as a limited means of communication can evolve into a fully developed language, demonstrating that linguistic systems are not fixed but responsive to the environments in which they arise. Such developments challenge the idea of language as a closed entity, revealing instead its openness to change and adaptation.

The concept of a lingua franca further highlights the functional dimension of language. A lingua franca serves as a common medium for communication among speakers of different languages, facilitating interaction across boundaries. Its significance lies not in its inherent properties but in its role within a network of social relations. The choice of a lingua franca reflects historical, economic, and political factors, shaping the patterns of communication that connect diverse communities. In the contemporary world, certain languages have assumed this role on a global scale, linking local practices to broader systems of exchange. The teaching of language must therefore take into account the diversity of its uses. Learning a language is not a uniform process, as different contexts demand different forms of competence. The purposes for which a language is learned—whether for education, commerce, or social interaction—determine the aspects that are emphasized and the strategies that are employed. This variability underscores the importance of understanding language not only as a system but as a set of practices oriented toward specific goals.

The interplay between dialect and register becomes particularly evident in situations where speakers adjust their language according to context. A single individual may shift from informal to formal speech, from one variety to another, depending on the demands of the situation. This flexibility reflects the adaptive nature of language, its capacity to accommodate the complexities of social life. The boundaries between forms are not rigid but permeable, allowing for movement and transformation. Language, in this sense, is a dynamic resource, continuously reshaped by its users. Ultimately, the study of the users and uses of language reveals that linguistic variation is not incidental but essential. It reflects the diversity of human experience, the multiplicity of social

roles, and the variability of contexts in which communication occurs. Language cannot be reduced to a set of rules detached from its speakers; it must be understood as a social phenomenon, embedded in the practices that give it meaning. By focusing on how language is used, rather than solely on how it is structured, this perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of its role in human life.

Fishman, J. A. (1972) Readings in the Sociology of Language. The Hague: Mouton.

The Discipline of Voice: When Speech Sustains Peace

In Lorna Marshall's Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among /Kung Bushmen, language appears not as an abstract system of signs but as a vital social mechanism through which tension is managed, relationships are negotiated, and collective life is preserved under conditions where conflict could easily become destructive. The practices of sharing, giving, and especially talking reveal that communication is inseparable from survival, not only in the material sense of securing food and resources, but in the equally crucial sense of maintaining cohesion within a fragile social order. What emerges is a vision of language as a continuous social activity, one that regulates emotion, distributes responsibility, and prevents the escalation of hostility.

The social structure within which these practices operate is one of profound interdependence. Life cannot be sustained in isolation, and the individual is always situated within a network of relationships that provide both material support and emotional security. Access to food and water is mediated through collective arrangements, while belonging to a group ensures not only survival but also recognition and protection. This dependence, however, is not accompanied by an idealized harmony. Tensions, rivalries, and moments of indifference persist, revealing that cooperation is not a natural state but an achieved one, maintained through ongoing effort. The necessity of coexistence imposes a discipline, a set of expectations that guide behavior and constrain impulses that might otherwise disrupt the group. Within this framework, talking assumes a central role. It is not merely a means of exchanging information but the primary instrument through which social equilibrium is maintained. Conversation flows continuously, accompanying daily activities and extending into the night, creating an environment in which silence is rare and communication is constant. This uninterrupted exchange serves to keep individuals connected, ensuring that thoughts, concerns, and emotions remain visible to others. The effect is not simply the sharing of knowledge but the prevention of isolation, which might otherwise foster resentment or misunderstanding. Language, in this sense, operates as a form of social circulation, distributing awareness and sustaining cohesion.

The content of these conversations reflects the practical and emotional concerns of the community. Discussions of food, hunting, and distribution reveal the material basis of life, while exchanges about gifts and obligations expose the moral economy that underpins social relations. Through these discussions, individuals evaluate one another, express approval or dissatisfaction, and negotiate expectations. Speech becomes a medium of accountability, where actions are interpreted and judged within the collective. Even criticism, when voiced, contributes to the maintenance of norms, reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The style of interaction further emphasizes the communal nature of communication. Speech is rarely solitary; it is accompanied by responses, echoes, and interjections that create a rhythm of participation. Listeners do not remain passive but actively engage, affirming the speaker's words and contributing to the flow of conversation. Laughter punctuates these exchanges, serving as both a social signal and an

emotional release. It diffuses tension, transforms potential conflict into shared amusement, and reaffirms the bonds between participants. The performative quality of speech thus reinforces its social function, making communication a collective act rather than an individual expression.

More structured forms of verbal interaction emerge in moments of heightened tension. The “talk,” as a form of open confrontation, provides a space in which grievances can be expressed and contested. Unlike silent resentment, which might accumulate and lead to violence, this public exchange allows conflict to be externalized and negotiated. Participants align themselves, arguments are articulated, and the collective presence ensures that the process remains bounded. Resolution is achieved not through suppression but through expression, often culminating in a tangible act, such as the offering of a gift, that restores balance. The “talk” demonstrates that conflict, rather than being avoided entirely, is managed through structured communication. Other forms of speech address different emotional states. The “shout,” emerging in moments of crisis, functions as a collective release, transforming individual distress into a shared expression. It allows the group to acknowledge and process sudden disruptions, preventing the internalization of anxiety. Similarly, repetitive expressions of distress, particularly in relation to scarcity, provide an outlet for ongoing concerns that might otherwise become overwhelming. These forms of speech may not conform to conventional dialogue, yet they serve an essential function in maintaining psychological and social stability.

The presence of conversational boundaries, such as restrictions on certain topics, further illustrates the regulatory role of language. These limitations are not arbitrary but reflect an awareness of the potential consequences of speech. By controlling what can be said and when, the community manages the risks associated with communication, ensuring that language contributes to cohesion rather than division. Even in its apparent freedom, speech operates within an implicit framework that guides its use. Taken together, these practices reveal that language within this context is not a neutral medium but an active force in shaping social life. It does not merely reflect relationships; it sustains them. By facilitating constant interaction, providing outlets for emotion, and structuring the expression of conflict, language prevents tensions from escalating into violence. It creates a system in which individuals remain aware of one another, where grievances are addressed before they harden, and where the collective is continuously reaffirmed. The significance of this analysis extends beyond the specific community described. It suggests that language, in its most fundamental sense, is a mechanism for managing the complexities of human coexistence. The forms it takes may vary, but its role as a mediator of social relations remains constant. In this light, speech is not simply a vehicle for meaning but a practice through which society maintains itself, demonstrating that the stability of a group depends as much on how it speaks as on what it does.

Marshall, L. (1961) Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions Among /Kung Bushmen. Africa, 31(3), pp. 231–249.

The Grammar of Society: When Roles Speak Like Words

In Philip K. Bock’s Social Structure and Language Structure, the relationship between language and society is reconceptualized through a structural analogy that treats linguistic forms as part of a broader system of cultural organization, where the patterns governing speech mirror those governing social behavior. Rather than seeking loose correspondences between language and thought, this approach proposes that language is a special case of a more general phenomenon: the patterned organization of human activity through shared expectations. Language does not stand

apart from culture; it exemplifies it, revealing in a particularly clear form how systems of meaning are constructed, maintained, and distributed.

At the core of this perspective lies the idea that cultural forms consist of interrelated expectations and agreements that guide behavior. These forms are not necessarily conscious, yet they exert a powerful influence, shaping actions in ways that appear regular and predictable. Linguistic structures provide an especially visible instance of such forms. The organization of sounds, words, and sentences reflects a shared understanding among speakers, an implicit agreement about what combinations are possible and meaningful. This agreement allows language to function with a degree of stability, enabling communication while also permitting variation within defined limits. The analogy extends by identifying corresponding units in social structure. Just as language is composed of elements such as morphemes, social life is organized through roles, temporal patterns, and spatial arrangements. Social roles represent clusters of expectations regarding behavior, defining what it means to occupy a particular position within a group. These roles are not fixed entities but configurations of attributes, some essential and others variable, that together establish a recognizable pattern. The comparison to linguistic units is instructive: a morpheme is defined not by a single sound but by a specific combination of features, just as a role is defined by a particular arrangement of behavioral expectations. In both cases, meaning arises not from isolated elements but from their structured combination.

This insight highlights a fundamental principle: individual components, whether phonemes or behavioral attributes, are largely without meaning on their own. It is only through their integration into a larger system that they acquire significance. A sound becomes meaningful when it participates in a recognizable pattern, just as an action becomes intelligible when it aligns with the expectations of a role. The structure, therefore, precedes and organizes meaning, providing a framework within which individual elements can function. This structural dependency underscores the extent to which both language and social life are governed by relational systems rather than isolated acts. The analogy becomes even more compelling when considering the external distribution of these units. In language, the form a morpheme takes can vary depending on its context, producing different variants conditioned by surrounding elements. Similarly, social roles do not exist in isolation but are defined through their relationships with other roles. The expectations associated with a particular role shift depending on the context in which it is performed, reflecting the dynamic interplay between different positions within a social network. This variability does not undermine the stability of the system; rather, it demonstrates its adaptability, its capacity to accommodate different situations while maintaining coherence.

The concept of a role-set further illustrates this relational nature. Each role is embedded within a network of associated roles, and its performance is shaped by these connections. A single position may involve multiple expectations, each activated in relation to a different counterpart. This multiplicity parallels the behavior of linguistic forms, which adjust their realization according to the structures in which they appear. The comparison suggests that both language and social organization operate through patterns of distribution, where the form of an element is conditioned by its place within a system. The dimensions of social space and time add another layer to this structure. Social situations are not merely collections of roles but organized configurations that unfold within specific temporal and spatial frameworks. These situations function as cognitive maps, guiding behavior by establishing expectations about where and when certain actions should occur. Just as linguistic elements are constrained by their position within a sequence, social roles are conditioned by their placement within a structured environment. The organization of time and

space thus becomes integral to the functioning of social systems, shaping the possibilities for action and interaction.

The notion of a situation as a structured entity reveals that social life is composed of recurring patterns, each with its own internal organization and external connections. These patterns can be analyzed in a manner analogous to linguistic structures, identifying the components and their relationships without necessarily addressing their meaning. Such an analysis provides a formal description of social organization, highlighting the regularities that underlie seemingly complex behaviors. The introduction of a situation-matrix as a conceptual tool allows for the systematic mapping of roles, times, and spaces, offering a framework for understanding how these elements are distributed and coordinated. This approach emphasizes that the study of social structure, like the study of language, benefits from a focus on form and distribution. By identifying the units of a system and the rules governing their interaction, it becomes possible to describe the organization of behavior with precision. The goal is not to reduce social life to a mechanical model but to reveal the patterns that make it intelligible. In doing so, the analysis demonstrates that the same principles that govern linguistic structure can illuminate the organization of social systems.

Ultimately, the analogy between language and social structure suggests that both are manifestations of a deeper human capacity to create and maintain patterned systems of meaning. Language provides a clear and accessible example of this capacity, but it is not unique. The structures that organize speech also organize behavior, linking communication to the broader processes through which societies are formed and sustained. By examining these parallels, the study offers a unified perspective on culture, one that recognizes the continuity between linguistic and social forms and underscores the role of structure in shaping human experience.

Bock, P. K. (1962) Social Structure and Language Structure. Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, 18(3), pp. 211–230.

The Hidden Politics of Address: When Pronouns Define Relations

In Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity, the seemingly simple act of addressing another person is revealed as a structured expression of social relations, where the choice of pronoun encodes hierarchies, affiliations, and shifting cultural values that extend far beyond grammar into the organization of society itself. What appears to be a minor linguistic distinction—between forms of familiarity and politeness—emerges as a system through which speakers continuously position themselves and others within networks of power and connection. Language, in this sense, does not merely reflect social relations; it actively constructs and negotiates them in every act of address.

Historically, the evolution of pronouns of address demonstrates how linguistic forms adapt to social structures. The movement from a single form of singular address to a distinction between familiar and respectful forms reflects a growing need to encode differences in status and authority. The use of plural forms for singular address, initially associated with figures of power, illustrates how language can elevate individuals by representing them as embodying more than themselves. This shift establishes a pattern in which linguistic multiplicity becomes a marker of social elevation, embedding hierarchy directly into everyday speech. Over time, this distinction stabilizes into a broader system, where different forms of address signal different kinds of relationships. The emergence of what can be called the semantic of power reveals a deeply asymmetrical structure. In such a system, the direction of address is not reciprocal but hierarchical: the superior uses one form, while the subordinate responds with another. This asymmetry is grounded in broader social

arrangements, where authority is defined by factors such as wealth, institutional position, or familial hierarchy. Language becomes a mechanism through which these distinctions are maintained, reinforcing the separation between those who command and those who obey. The pronoun is thus not merely a word but a sign of position, an index of the speaker's place within a structured order.

Yet this system does not remain static. As social relations evolve, a new semantic dimension emerges, one based not on hierarchy but on equality. The development of solidarity as a principle of address introduces reciprocity, where both speakers use the same form to signal a shared status or mutual recognition. This shift reflects broader changes in social organization, where rigid hierarchies begin to give way to more fluid and egalitarian relationships. The use of familiar forms among equals becomes a way of expressing connection, emphasizing commonality rather than difference. In this context, language adapts to new social values, transforming from a tool of differentiation into a medium of affiliation. The coexistence of these two dimensions—power and solidarity—creates a dynamic system in which speakers must navigate multiple possibilities. The choice of pronoun is rarely neutral; it involves an assessment of the relationship between speaker and addressee, taking into account factors such as status, familiarity, and context. This choice can affirm existing hierarchies, challenge them, or redefine them altogether. The variability of usage reflects the complexity of social life, where relationships are not fixed but negotiated through interaction. Language provides the means through which these negotiations occur, allowing speakers to adjust their expressions in response to changing circumstances.

Beyond its semantic function, pronoun usage also serves as an expression of social style. Different groups adopt particular forms of address to signal their identity and values. In some contexts, the use of formal pronouns may indicate refinement or adherence to tradition, while in others, the use of familiar forms may signal a commitment to equality or informality. These patterns reveal that language is not only shaped by social structures but also participates in their transformation, as speakers align themselves with particular ideologies through their linguistic choices. The pronoun becomes a marker of belonging, a subtle yet powerful indicator of affiliation. Historical moments of social upheaval further illustrate the political significance of pronoun usage. Movements that challenge established hierarchies often seek to reform language as part of their broader agenda, promoting forms of address that reflect their ideals. The rejection of hierarchical pronouns in favor of universal forms represents an attempt to reshape social relations through linguistic means, to create a language that embodies equality. Such efforts demonstrate that language is not merely a passive reflection of change but an active participant in it, capable of both reinforcing and resisting existing structures.

In contemporary contexts, the balance between power and solidarity continues to shift. While hierarchical distinctions persist in certain domains, there is a growing tendency toward reciprocal forms of address that emphasize equality. This shift reflects broader social transformations, including the erosion of rigid class structures and the rise of more egalitarian values. Yet the persistence of formal distinctions in specific contexts indicates that the semantic of power has not disappeared but has been reconfigured. Language thus retains its capacity to express both hierarchy and connection, adapting to the complexities of modern social life. The study of pronouns of address ultimately reveals that even the smallest elements of language are deeply embedded in social processes. The choice of a single word can convey respect, intimacy, authority, or solidarity, encapsulating the relationship between speaker and listener in a concise form. This capacity highlights the broader principle that language operates as a system of social signs, where meaning is inseparable from context and use. Pronouns, in their simplicity, exemplify the profound

connection between linguistic structure and social structure, demonstrating that every act of speech is also an act of positioning within the social world.

Brown, R. and Gilman, A. (1960) The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity. In: T. A. Sebeok (ed.) Style in Language. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 253–276.

The Matrix of Speech: When Communities Organize Language

In John J. Gumperz's Types of Linguistic Communities, the study of language is redirected from the abstraction of unified systems toward the complex realities of communication as it unfolds within social environments, where speech is neither homogeneous nor isolated but structured through networks of interaction, roles, and contexts. The longstanding separation between linguistic analysis and anthropological observation is revealed as a limitation, one that obscures the fact that language cannot be meaningfully understood apart from the communities that sustain it. What appears as a single language dissolves into a multiplicity of forms, each tied to specific patterns of use and shaped by the social conditions in which it operates.

Traditional linguistic approaches, by privileging structural uniformity and genetic relationships, have tended to treat variation as secondary or incidental. Everyday differences in speech—those arising from context, interaction, or borrowing—were often dismissed as marginal, excluded from the core description of language. This perspective allowed for the development of systematic typologies and historical reconstructions, yet it did so at the cost of ignoring the lived complexity of communication. Language, when viewed in isolation from its social environment, becomes an abstraction that fails to capture the dynamic processes through which meaning is produced and negotiated. The recognition of this limitation has led to a shift toward viewing linguistic communication as an interconnected system of subcodes. Rather than a single, unified structure, language appears as a constellation of related forms, each associated with particular contexts and functions. This multiplicity does not indicate disorder but reflects a higher level of organization, where complexity arises from the interaction between different codes. Such an understanding parallels developments in anthropology, where social complexity is no longer seen as a simple hierarchy but as a network of interrelated systems. Language and society thus converge in their structural logic, both exhibiting patterns that are distributed rather than centralized.

The role of the social environment becomes central in this reconfiguration. Earlier theories that emphasized internal linguistic processes, such as drift, are supplemented by approaches that highlight the influence of contact, geography, and cultural interaction. Languages do not evolve in isolation; they are shaped by the conditions of their use, borrowing and adapting in response to social needs. The concept of linguistic areas illustrates this process, showing how languages from different families can develop shared features through sustained interaction. This perspective shifts attention from origins to relationships, from internal structure to external influence. The concept of the linguistic community provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. A community is defined not simply by a shared language but by patterns of interaction that bind its members together. These patterns determine how language is used, when different forms are appropriate, and how communication is organized. A community may be monolingual or multilingual, but in either case, its defining feature is the regularity of interaction among its members. Language, within this framework, becomes a function of social relations, shaped by the frequency, intensity, and context of communication.

Within such communities, variation is not random but structured according to social roles and functions. Each role carries with it expectations about behavior, including patterns of speech.

These expectations form part of a broader communication matrix, a system that organizes the relationships between roles and the linguistic forms associated with them. Language use is thus conditioned by the position of the speaker within this matrix, reflecting the interplay between social structure and communicative practice. The idea of a code matrix extends this insight, capturing the range of linguistic forms available within a community and their distribution across different contexts. The complexity of this matrix varies across different types of societies. In smaller or less stratified communities, linguistic variation may be limited, with fewer distinctions between codes. Yet even in such settings, multiple forms of speech may coexist, each serving a particular function. In more stratified societies, the differentiation becomes more pronounced, with distinct codes associated with different social groups or roles. The emergence of high and low varieties of language reflects these divisions, marking differences in status and function within the community. Language thus becomes a visible expression of social hierarchy, encoding distinctions that are otherwise embedded in social organization.

As societies become more complex and specialized, the communication matrix expands, incorporating a greater diversity of roles and contexts. Occupational specialization, economic differentiation, and social stratification all contribute to the proliferation of linguistic forms. Each domain of activity may develop its own patterns of speech, creating a rich tapestry of variation. Yet this complexity is not chaotic; it is organized through the relationships between roles and the functions they serve. The multiplicity of codes reflects the multiplicity of social life, with language adapting to the demands of each context. In highly urbanized settings, a different pattern emerges. The increased mobility of individuals and the fluidity of social roles lead to a reduction in the distance between linguistic forms. Standardization becomes more prominent, as diverse dialects converge into a common framework. At the same time, variation persists in the form of stylistic differences and specialized vocabularies, reflecting the continued importance of context in shaping speech. The apparent homogeneity of language in such environments masks an underlying complexity, where subtle variations carry significant social meaning.

The study of linguistic communities thus reveals that language is best understood as part of a broader system of social organization. It is not a static entity but a dynamic process, continually shaped by the interactions and relationships that define a community. By examining the connections between language and social structure, it becomes possible to uncover the patterns that govern communication, offering insight into both linguistic and social phenomena. Language, in this view, is not merely a means of expression but a fundamental component of social life, reflecting and reinforcing the structures within which it is used.

Gumperz, J. J. (1968) Types of Linguistic Communities. In: J. A. Fishman (ed.) Readings in the Sociology of Language. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 381–386.

Beyond the Human Voice: When Language Exceeds the Speaker

In Alastair Pennycook's Introducing Posthumanist Applied Linguistics from Posthumanist Applied Linguistics, the study of language is reoriented through a challenge to one of its most enduring assumptions: that language belongs primarily to humans as autonomous agents, detached from the material and ecological worlds they inhabit. This intervention does not arise in abstraction but from the recognition of a historical moment marked by displacement, inequality, environmental crisis, and intensifying divisions, where the very category of the human—long treated as stable and universal—reveals its exclusions and limitations. The question is no longer

simply how humans use language, but how language itself participates in a wider network of relations that extends beyond the human.

The traditional appeal to shared humanity as a moral foundation appears increasingly fragile when confronted with the realities of exclusion, violence, and environmental degradation. The same concept that promises unity has historically defined who counts as human and who does not, producing boundaries that marginalize as much as they include. The critique, therefore, is not directed at ethical commitments themselves but at the framework that underpins them, one that elevates the human as a distinct and superior category. To rethink language within this context requires a broader reconsideration of how humans relate to the world, to animals, to objects, and to the environments that sustain them. Posthumanist thought emerges as an attempt to unsettle this hierarchy. It does not deny the importance of human experience but situates it within a larger assemblage of relations, where agency is distributed rather than concentrated. The human is no longer the central reference point but one element among many, entangled in processes that exceed individual intention. This shift challenges deeply ingrained habits of thought, including the tendency to interpret the world from a fixed human perspective. Even the simplest acts of perception reveal this bias, as understanding is anchored in the position of the observer rather than in the broader system of relations within which the observer exists. To move beyond this perspective is to recognize that meaning is not centered in the human but emerges from interactions across multiple scales.

The implications of this shift become particularly evident in the context of environmental change. The recognition that human activity has altered planetary systems introduces a paradox: humans appear both as dominant agents and as participants within processes that they cannot fully control. The naming of this condition foregrounds the entanglement of human and non-human forces, dissolving the boundary that once separated society from nature. Language, within this framework, cannot be understood as a purely human tool but as part of the material and ecological systems through which meaning is produced and circulated. Applied linguistics, traditionally grounded in human-centered models of communication and cognition, encounters a profound challenge in this perspective. Language has often been conceptualized as a system used by individuals to express thoughts or to transmit information. Such models privilege internal mental processes and individual agency, treating the environment as a background rather than an active participant. A posthumanist approach disrupts this view by emphasizing that language is distributed across bodies, objects, and spaces, shaped by interactions that extend beyond the individual speaker. Meaning arises not solely from intention but from the interplay between human and non-human elements, from the material conditions that enable and constrain communication.

This reconfiguration opens new ways of understanding language practices. The study of linguistic environments, the analysis of interactions that involve objects and spaces, and the recognition of the role of materiality in communication all point toward a more expansive view of language. Speech and writing are no longer isolated acts but components of broader assemblages, where signs, technologies, and environments co-produce meaning. The boundaries between language and context become porous, revealing that what has often been treated as external to language is in fact integral to its operation. The reconsideration of cognition follows a similar trajectory. Rather than viewing thought as confined within the mind, a distributed perspective recognizes that cognitive processes are shaped by interactions with the environment. Tools, spaces, and social relations all contribute to the formation of meaning, suggesting that language learning and use cannot be reduced to internal mechanisms alone. This perspective aligns with a broader shift toward

understanding knowledge as situated and embodied, emerging from engagement with the world rather than detached from it.

Such a transformation inevitably raises questions about the role of human agency and responsibility. To decenter the human is not to eliminate ethical concern but to expand it, acknowledging that actions have consequences that extend beyond human communities. Language, as part of these processes, becomes a site where these responsibilities are articulated and contested. The way language is taught, studied, and used reflects assumptions about the world and the relationships within it. A posthumanist perspective invites a reconsideration of these assumptions, encouraging approaches that recognize interdependence rather than separation. At the same time, this perspective resists the temptation to replace one form of determinism with another. The critique of human exceptionalism does not entail the denial of human experience but seeks to situate it within a broader field of relations. This positioning allows for the recognition of both constraint and possibility, of the ways in which language is shaped by structures while remaining open to transformation. The emphasis shifts from control to participation, from mastery to engagement, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is produced.

Ultimately, the move toward a posthumanist applied linguistics reveals that language cannot be confined to the boundaries that have traditionally defined it. It is not merely a human possession but a process that emerges from the interactions between humans, environments, and material forms. By attending to these interactions, it becomes possible to develop a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of language, one that reflects the complexity of the world in which it operates. Such an understanding does not abandon the study of language but deepens it, opening new avenues for inquiry and practice that acknowledge the entangled nature of meaning itself.

Pennycook, A. (2018) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

The Ecology of Meaning: When Language Spreads Across the World

In Alastair Pennycook's discussion Distributed Language, Spatial Repertoires, and Semiotic Assemblages from Posthumanist Applied Linguistics, language is reimagined not as a bounded system housed within individuals, but as a distributed practice that unfolds across bodies, environments, objects, and interactions, where meaning emerges through coordination rather than possession. The familiar assumption that language resides in the mind gives way to a more expansive view in which cognition, perception, and communication are inseparable from the material and spatial conditions in which they occur. What appears to be an individual act of speaking or understanding is revealed instead as a collective achievement, dependent on a network of relations that extend far beyond the speaker.

The example of underwater navigation provides a striking illustration of this shift. A diver does not rely solely on internal knowledge to find direction but draws upon a complex array of resources: maps, compasses, bodily sensations, environmental features, and shared signals. Navigation becomes an interpretive process, constantly adjusted in response to changing conditions, where the environment itself participates in guiding action. The map sketched before the dive does not function as a complete representation but as a starting point, a framework that must be reworked in real time as the diver encounters currents, visibility constraints, and physical landmarks. Knowledge, in this context, is not stored but enacted, emerging through the interaction between the diver and the surrounding world. This perspective aligns with the notion of distributed cognition, which challenges the idea that thinking is confined to the brain. Instead, cognition is understood as a process that spans multiple elements, including tools, spaces, and sensory

experiences. Objects such as compasses or maps do not merely assist cognition; they are integral to it, shaping how information is organized and acted upon. The environment, far from being a passive backdrop, becomes an active participant, providing cues and constraints that guide behavior. The boundaries between mind and world blur, revealing a system in which knowledge is produced through engagement rather than isolation.

When this understanding is extended to language, it transforms the way communication is conceived. Language is no longer a discrete system used by individuals to encode and transmit information, but part of the broader processes through which cognition and action are coordinated. Words, gestures, objects, and spatial arrangements all contribute to meaning, forming assemblages in which communication is distributed across multiple modalities. Language does not simply extend thought; it is embedded within a network of practices that make thought possible. The act of speaking becomes one element within a larger configuration, where meaning arises from the interplay of diverse resources. This reconfiguration challenges traditional notions of linguistic repertoire. Rather than being a set of internalized competencies possessed by individuals, a repertoire is better understood as a spatial and social distribution of resources. It is shaped by the environments in which communication occurs, by the objects that mediate interaction, and by the practices that define particular contexts. In settings such as markets or kitchens, language is inseparable from the activities taking place. The availability of certain expressions, the use of multiple languages, and the incorporation of gestures or objects all depend on the immediate situation. Repertoire, in this sense, is not owned but accessed, emerging through participation in specific environments.

The role of objects within these processes further underscores the distributed nature of language. Items that might traditionally be considered external to communication become integral to it, influencing how interactions unfold. In a marketplace, the physical qualities of goods can shape negotiation, becoming part of the communicative exchange. In a kitchen, tools and ingredients contribute to the coordination of action, guiding both speech and behavior. These objects are not inert; they function as semiotic resources, carrying meaning and affecting outcomes. Communication thus extends beyond human interaction to include the material world, forming assemblages in which meaning is co-produced. This perspective leads to a broader reconsideration of agency. If language and cognition are distributed across networks of human and non-human elements, then agency cannot be attributed solely to individuals. It emerges from the interactions within these networks, from the coordination of actions that involve multiple participants and resources. The human remains a central participant, but not the sole origin of meaning. Instead, meaning is generated through the alignment of diverse elements, each contributing to the process in different ways.

The implications of this view are significant for the study of language. It suggests that traditional models, which focus on internal competence and abstract systems, capture only a limited aspect of linguistic reality. To understand language fully, it is necessary to attend to the environments in which it is used, the objects that mediate it, and the practices that sustain it. Language becomes an ecological phenomenon, embedded in the conditions of its use and shaped by the interactions that define those conditions. Ultimately, the concept of distributed language reveals that communication is not a matter of transmitting information from one mind to another, but a process of coordinating activity within a shared world. It is through this coordination that meaning emerges, linking individuals to their environments and to each other. By recognizing the distributed nature of language, it becomes possible to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is produced, one that reflects the complexity of the systems in

which it operates. Language, in this view, is not contained but extended, not fixed but continually reassembled through the interactions that bring it into being.

Pennycook, A. (2018) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

The Productive Failure of Meaning: When Misunderstanding Speaks

In Alastair Pennycook's discussion of Mutual Misunderstanding and Intelligibility from Posthumanist Applied Linguistics, the deeply rooted belief that language exists to secure mutual understanding is critically unsettled, revealing instead that communication is not a transparent exchange of ideas but a complex, unstable process in which misunderstanding is not an anomaly but a constitutive feature. The conventional model assumes that language functions as a bridge between minds, a conduit through which thoughts pass intact from speaker to listener, and that success in communication is measured by the degree of shared comprehension. Yet this assumption, while intuitively appealing, rests on a series of unexamined premises about what language is and how it operates.

The widespread emphasis on mutual intelligibility, particularly in discussions of global communication, presumes that understanding is both the goal and the natural outcome of linguistic interaction. Even when flexibility is acknowledged—such as in the use of lingua franca forms—the underlying belief persists that speakers orient themselves toward clarity, efficiency, and shared meaning. This view relies on a realist conception of language as a stable entity that exists independently of its use, a system whose shared structure guarantees the possibility of understanding. If communication succeeds, it is taken as evidence of a shared language; if it fails, the explanation is sought in linguistic difference. In this way, the existence of language as a bounded system is both assumed and reaffirmed by the very phenomena it is used to explain. Such reasoning, however, conceals a circular logic. To claim that understanding depends on a shared language is already to assume the existence of such a language as a discrete object. This assumption obscures the diversity of communicative practices through which people make sense of each other, practices that extend beyond standardized forms and include gestures, contexts, shared experiences, and material environments. It also overlooks the possibility that communication does not always aim at full understanding, and that ambiguity, partial comprehension, or even deliberate opacity may play essential roles in interaction.

The critique of what may be called the dogma of intersubjective conformity exposes the limitations of the traditional model. The idea that speakers of the same language must understand each other in the same way reduces communication to a mechanical transfer of identical meanings. This model, rooted in earlier philosophical traditions, imagines language as a neutral medium, transparent and unproblematic. Yet such a view fails to account for the variability of interpretation, the influence of context, and the ways in which meaning is shaped by social relations, power structures, and embodied experience. Communication is not a simple alignment of mental contents but a negotiation that unfolds within a complex field of forces. The example of confusion in a multilingual restaurant setting illustrates this complexity with particular clarity. Here, the attempt to identify a dish through multiple linguistic resources leads not to resolution but to an escalation of uncertainty. Each new term, rather than clarifying the situation, introduces additional layers of interpretation, demonstrating that more language does not necessarily produce more understanding. The interaction does not fail because participants lack competence; rather, it reveals the inherent unpredictability of communication, where meanings shift and resist stabilization. The

persistence of misunderstanding in such a context is not an exception but a manifestation of the conditions under which language operates.

This recognition invites a shift in focus from understanding as an endpoint to alignment as a process. Alignment does not require identical interpretations but involves the ongoing adjustment of participants to each other and to the situation. It is a dynamic activity, responsive to changing conditions and open to revision. Participants draw on whatever resources are available—linguistic, gestural, material—to navigate the interaction, creating temporary points of coordination rather than permanent agreements. Communication becomes less about transmitting fixed meanings and more about managing relationships within a shared but unstable environment. The concept of attunement extends this perspective further by emphasizing sensitivity to the broader assemblage in which communication occurs. Interaction is not confined to human participants but involves objects, spaces, and environmental conditions that shape how meaning is produced. Attunement requires an awareness of these factors, a capacity to respond not only to words but to the entire configuration of the situation. In this sense, communication is an ecological process, distributed across multiple elements that together constitute the conditions of understanding.

By foregrounding misunderstanding, this approach challenges the normative assumption that communication should aim for perfect clarity. Instead, it suggests that ambiguity and difference are integral to the functioning of language, providing the space within which interaction takes place. Misunderstanding does not simply obstruct communication; it reveals its mechanisms, exposing the negotiations and adjustments that are otherwise taken for granted. It highlights the role of power, the asymmetries that shape who is understood and who is not, and the ways in which language can both connect and divide. Ultimately, the emphasis on mutual misunderstanding leads to a more nuanced conception of language, one that recognizes its instability and its dependence on context. Language is not a fixed system guaranteeing shared meaning but a set of practices through which meaning is continually constructed and contested. Communication, in this view, is not the elimination of difference but its management, a process that accommodates uncertainty rather than overcoming it. By embracing the productive role of misunderstanding, it becomes possible to understand language not as a perfect instrument of clarity but as a dynamic, relational phenomenon that reflects the complexity of human and more-than-human interaction.

Pennycook, A. (2018) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

The Commons of Expression: When Language Belongs to No One

In Alastair Pennycook's discussion of Towards a Posthumanist Applied Linguistic Commons from Posthumanist Applied Linguistics, the question of language is expanded beyond its traditional human-centered boundaries into a broader field of relations, where meaning, agency, and responsibility are distributed across humans, non-humans, and environments, and where language itself becomes part of a shared, collective condition rather than a possession of individual speakers. This reorientation does not merely add new elements to existing theories but destabilizes the very foundation upon which those theories have been built: the assumption that humans stand at the center of knowledge, action, and meaning.

The critique begins with the recognition that humanism, while historically productive, has also imposed a hierarchy that elevates human consciousness above all other forms of existence. This elevation is not simply philosophical but practical, shaping how knowledge is produced, how ethics are framed, and how language is understood. To question this hierarchy is not to deny human experience but to situate it within a broader network of relations, where humans are neither isolated

nor sovereign but deeply entangled with other forms of life and material processes. The notion of entanglement becomes central here, emphasizing that existence is not defined by separation but by interdependence. The difficulty of imagining the perspective of another being—whether animal or object—reveals the limits of anthropocentric thought. Attempts to understand what it is like to be something other than human often return to the human frame of reference, reinforcing the very boundaries they seek to transcend. Yet this limitation is precisely what posthumanist thought seeks to challenge. Rather than asking how closely other forms of existence resemble human experience, the question shifts toward how different forms of life and matter participate in shared processes of being. The emphasis moves from similarity to relation, from identity to interaction, opening a space in which meaning is no longer confined to human perception.

Within this framework, applied linguistics undergoes a profound transformation. Language can no longer be understood as a purely cognitive system located in the mind, nor as a neutral tool for communication. Instead, it is reconceived as embodied, embedded, enacted, and distributed across a range of semiotic assemblages. Speech, gesture, objects, and environments all contribute to the production of meaning, forming dynamic configurations in which communication takes place. Language learning, in this context, is not a linear process of input and output but a complex interaction with a world that is already structured by multiple forms of meaning. Sensory engagement, spatial orientation, and material interaction all become integral to the development and use of language. This expanded view challenges the reduction of language to a commodity or resource, a tendency that has become increasingly prevalent in discussions of globalization and economic exchange. When language is treated as a tool for achieving external goals—whether economic, political, or social—it is stripped of its relational and ecological dimensions. A posthumanist perspective resists this reduction by emphasizing that language is not merely used but lived, not simply exchanged but enacted within a network of relations that includes both human and non-human participants. Meaning is not produced by individuals alone but emerges from the interactions that constitute these networks.

The concept of the commons provides a powerful lens through which to understand these dynamics. Traditionally associated with shared resources such as land or water, the commons represents a mode of existence based on collective responsibility and mutual access. Applied to language, this concept suggests that communication is not owned but shared, not controlled by individuals but sustained through participation. Language becomes a common resource in a deeper sense: not a fixed system available for use, but an ongoing process through which relations are negotiated and maintained. This perspective challenges the privatization of meaning, the idea that language belongs to speakers in a way that can be possessed or controlled. Reclaiming the commons in this context also involves an ethical dimension. If language is part of a broader ecological system, then its use has consequences that extend beyond human interaction. Communication participates in shaping the environments in which it occurs, influencing not only social relations but also material conditions. A posthumanist applied linguistics thus calls for a reconsideration of responsibility, one that includes not only other humans but the more-than-human world. The ethical question is no longer limited to how we treat each other but extends to how our communicative practices affect the systems within which we are embedded.

This shift has implications for political engagement as well. The focus moves away from individual rights and toward collective responsibilities, recognizing that the challenges of the present—environmental degradation, inequality, and displacement—cannot be addressed within a purely human-centered framework. Language, as part of these processes, becomes a site of both reproduction and resistance, capable of reinforcing existing structures or opening new possibilities

for relation. The commons, in this sense, is not simply a resource but a space of potential, where alternative forms of interaction and organization can emerge. The idea of a posthumanist applied linguistic commons ultimately points toward a reconfiguration of how language is understood and studied. It invites a move away from models that isolate language within the individual or the system, toward an approach that recognizes its distributed, relational, and ecological nature. Communication is no longer seen as the transfer of meaning between discrete entities but as a process of alignment within a shared world, where humans, objects, and environments participate together in the production of meaning. In this perspective, language ceases to be a possession and becomes a condition of coexistence. It is not something that belongs to us, but something through which we are connected to others and to the world itself. By reimagining language as part of a commons, it becomes possible to develop a more inclusive and responsible understanding of communication, one that reflects the complexity of the relations that sustain it and the shared conditions that make it possible.

Pennycook, A. (2018) Posthumanist Applied Linguistics. London: Routledge.

The Currency of Speech: When Language Buys Power

In Khawla Badwan's discussion of Language and the Sociolinguistic Market, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation, language emerges not as a neutral medium of communication but as a form of symbolic capital circulating within a structured field of power, where its value is determined less by its internal properties than by the social forces that sustain and regulate its use. The idea that all languages are linguistically equal is not denied, yet this equality is immediately fractured by the realities of social life, where some languages command authority, mobility, and legitimacy, while others are rendered marginal, invisible, or expendable. Language, in this sense, does not merely reflect inequality; it actively participates in its reproduction.

The central principle that a language is worth what its speakers are worth introduces a direct correspondence between linguistic value and social hierarchy. Speech is never detached from the speaker; it carries the weight of social position, economic power, and historical circumstance. A voice does not enter the communicative space as an abstract bearer of meaning but as an embodiment of status, shaped by systems that determine who may speak, who will be heard, and whose words will carry authority. Communication is thus a site of selection and exclusion, where access to expression is unevenly distributed and where the capacity to be understood is itself a privilege. At the global level, this dynamic is intensified through historical and economic structures that position certain languages at the center of power. The legacy of colonialism and the ongoing realities of global capitalism ensure that languages associated with dominant nations acquire a disproportionate value, functioning as gateways to mobility, knowledge, and participation in global systems. The metaphor of a world divided between centers and peripheries reveals how linguistic hierarchies mirror broader inequalities, with languages of the powerful circulating widely while those of the marginalized are confined or devalued. In this configuration, the prominence of particular languages is not an accident of communication but a consequence of political and economic dominance.

The second principle, that a dominant language sets the standard against which all others are measured, further consolidates this hierarchy. Once a language achieves dominance within a given market, it becomes the implicit norm, shaping perceptions of correctness, legitimacy, and competence. Other languages and varieties are evaluated in relation to this standard, often appearing deficient or inferior by comparison. This process does not merely rank languages; it

transforms the entire field of communication, establishing criteria that privilege certain forms of expression while marginalizing others. The dominance of a language thus extends beyond its use, influencing the very conditions under which language is judged and valued. The metaphor of the sociolinguistic market captures the transactional nature of these processes. Language becomes a resource in which individuals invest, seeking to acquire forms that yield social and economic returns. Yet this market is not open or equitable. Access to valued linguistic forms is uneven, determined by factors such as class, education, and geographic location. Those who possess the linguistic capital associated with dominant languages are able to convert it into opportunities, while those without such access find their possibilities constrained. The market produces not only exchanges but divisions, distinguishing between those who can navigate its demands and those who cannot.

The variability of linguistic value introduces an additional layer of complexity. Like currency, the worth of a language is not fixed but fluctuates across contexts, shaped by the conditions of its use and the audiences it addresses. A language that carries prestige in one setting may lose its value in another, revealing that linguistic capital is always contingent. This variability requires speakers to develop a sensitivity to context, an ability to adjust their language use in response to shifting expectations. Such adaptability becomes a crucial competence, allowing individuals to move between different domains and to negotiate the demands of diverse communicative situations. However, the capacity to adapt is itself unequally distributed. The expectation that individuals can simply choose the appropriate language for a given context overlooks the structural constraints that limit access to linguistic resources. Not everyone can acquire or deploy the forms that the market rewards, and the demand for flexibility often obscures the inequalities that make such flexibility possible for some and unattainable for others. The image of language as a wardrobe from which one selects the appropriate attire fails to account for those who lack the means to obtain the garments required. In this way, the sociolinguistic market perpetuates its own stratification, rewarding those already positioned to succeed while excluding others.

The relationship between language and identity further complicates this picture. If language is a form of capital, its strategic use may appear as a means of advancement. Yet such use can also create tensions, as individuals negotiate between the demands of the market and their sense of self. Identity, understood not as a fixed essence but as a performance enacted through interaction, becomes fluid and contingent, shaped by the contexts in which language is used. The need to align one’s speech with the expectations of different environments requires a constant reconfiguration of self, challenging the notion of authenticity and revealing identity as an ongoing process rather than a stable attribute. Ultimately, the concept of the sociolinguistic market exposes the entanglement of language with power, economy, and social structure. Language is not simply a means of communication but a medium through which value is assigned, hierarchies are maintained, and opportunities are distributed. The market is not a neutral arena but a contested space, where struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and access are continuously enacted. To understand language within this framework is to recognize that every act of speech participates in a broader system of exchange, where meaning is inseparable from the conditions under which it is produced and received.

Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Living Pulse of Speech: When Language Becomes Us

In Khawla Badwan's discussion of Language as Becoming in the World from Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact, language is reclaimed from the rigid frameworks that reduce it to utility and repositioned as a lived, affective, and relational force through which individuals come into being, connect across distances, and inhabit the world. Against the dominance of neoliberal discourses that frame language as an economic investment, this perspective insists that language cannot be confined to market logic without losing its most essential dimensions—its capacity to create bonds, sustain memory, and shape the very texture of human existence.

The critique of neoliberalism here is not merely theoretical but experiential. Language, when viewed through the lens of value and exchange, becomes a measurable asset, a skill to be acquired for mobility and survival within competitive systems. Such a view is powerful precisely because it aligns with broader economic realities, making it difficult to resist. Yet its dominance comes at a cost: it obscures other ways of understanding language, ways that foreground connection, emotion, and identity. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to reject this framework but to expand beyond it, to recognize that language operates simultaneously within and beyond systems of valuation. The idea of language as the "first sharing" captures its foundational role in human life. Before language becomes a tool, it is an encounter, a moment of connection between individuals that establishes the possibility of relation. Through language, children do not merely learn to communicate; they begin to participate in a world of meanings, to situate themselves within networks of belonging and difference. Speech becomes a medium through which the self is formed, not as a fixed entity but as an evolving presence shaped by interaction. The way one speaks is inseparable from who one becomes, revealing language as a process of continual self-making.

This process extends beyond individual development into the realm of identity and heritage. Languages that are marginalized within global hierarchies retain profound significance for those who speak them, offering access to histories, cultural practices, and modes of being that cannot be translated into dominant forms. The value of such languages lies not in their market utility but in their capacity to sustain connections across generations and geographies. They carry meanings that are lived rather than calculated, embodying experiences that resist commodification. The intimate narrative of intergenerational communication illustrates this dimension with particular clarity. The gradual emergence of shared language between a child and his grandparents transforms interaction from a fragmented exchange into a meaningful connection. Words become more than signs; they become bridges across separation, enabling expressions of affection that resonate beyond their literal content. The moment of recognition, when language finally aligns with feeling, reveals its power to overcome distance, not through efficiency but through presence. Such moments expose the limitations of viewing language as mere function, highlighting instead its role in shaping emotional and relational worlds.

At the same time, language is never static. It moves with people, adapting to new environments and absorbing influences from diverse sources. Even within a single household, multiple linguistic trajectories coexist, reflecting the interplay between stability and change. The incorporation of new phonetic features or expressions from media demonstrates how language evolves through exposure and interaction, carrying traces of different places and experiences. This movement underscores that language is not anchored to a single location or identity but is continually reconfigured through contact. The role of language during moments of crisis further emphasizes its significance beyond communication. In situations of uncertainty and isolation, language can provide comfort, offering a means of escape, connection, and emotional expression. The sounds of different languages,

blending within shared spaces, create a sense of coexistence that transcends physical separation. Yet this function is not without tension. The same conditions that allow language to serve as refuge also reveal its capacity to exclude, as inequalities in access and recognition become more pronounced. Language, therefore, cannot be idealized; it remains entangled with the structures that shape its use.

A critical dimension of this discussion lies in the language used to describe language itself. Terms that categorize and evaluate linguistic practices carry implicit judgments about speakers, reinforcing social hierarchies and perpetuating exclusion. Labels such as "prestigious" or "non-native" do more than describe; they position individuals within systems of value that determine their legitimacy and worth. Language becomes a site of social action, where meanings are not only conveyed but imposed, contested, and transformed. To engage with language critically is to interrogate these discourses, to uncover the assumptions they carry and the effects they produce. The call to reclaim language from commodified frameworks aligns with broader efforts to challenge the ideologies that have shaped its perception. This process involves recognizing language as a shared human and cultural resource, one that cannot be reduced to its economic function. It also requires collective action, a reorientation toward practices that value diversity, connection, and expression over standardization and control. Decolonizing language, in this sense, is not a single act but an ongoing struggle to redefine its role in the world.

Ultimately, the conception of language as becoming invites a shift in perspective from possession to participation. Language is not something individuals simply have; it is something they live through, a process that unfolds in relation to others and to the environments they inhabit. It shapes and is shaped by these relations, reflecting the complexity of human experience in a globalized world. By recognizing this dynamic, it becomes possible to move beyond reductive frameworks and to embrace a more expansive understanding of language—one that acknowledges its role in creating, sustaining, and transforming the connections that define existence itself.

Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Illusion of the Named Tongue: When Language Becomes Languaging

In Khawla Badwan's discussion of From Language to Languaging from Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact, the concept of language is unsettled at its very foundation, shifting from a stable, named entity toward an ongoing, dynamic process of interaction that resists containment within national, institutional, or cognitive boundaries. What is commonly taken for granted as "language" is revealed to be an ideological construction, shaped by historical forces and sustained through political, educational, and social practices that privilege uniformity over complexity. The move toward languaging marks a departure from this static conception, opening a space in which communication is understood as fluid, embodied, and relational.

The apparent familiarity of language conceals its conceptual instability. In everyday discourse, language is treated as a coherent system, a bounded entity associated with a particular group, nation, or territory. This understanding, often aligned with what may be called a normative or nationalized conception, presents language as a unified code governed by rules and shared by a homogeneous community. Such a view is deeply embedded in modern political history, particularly in the formation of nation-states, where language functions as a symbol of collective identity and loyalty. The coupling of language with nation produces a powerful narrative in which

belonging is defined through linguistic conformity, and deviation becomes a marker of difference or exclusion. This ideology of linguistic unity is sustained through the notion of purity. Language is imagined as something that can be preserved, standardized, and protected from contamination, an ideal that manifests most clearly in educational systems and official policies. Standard varieties are elevated as legitimate forms, while regional dialects and hybrid practices are marginalized or dismissed. The reduction of linguistic diversity to a single, authorized form simplifies the complexity of actual language use, transforming a heterogeneous field into a manageable abstraction. Yet this simplification is not neutral; it serves specific political and cultural purposes, reinforcing hierarchies and legitimizing certain identities over others.

The insistence on a one-language-one-community model further obscures the realities of linguistic life. In practice, what is labeled as a single language often encompasses a wide range of varieties, each with its own history, structure, and social function. The naming of languages creates the illusion of coherence, masking the internal diversity that characterizes them. This process extends to the categorization of languages into hierarchies—first, second, or foreign—imposing a linear framework that fails to capture the multiplicity of linguistic experience. Such categorizations reflect not the nature of language itself but the institutional contexts in which language is managed and evaluated. Historical examples of linguistic policy illustrate the persistence of these ideologies. The call for linguistic uniformity in revolutionary and modern contexts reveals a recurring desire to align language with political unity. Whether framed as a necessity for national cohesion or as a requirement for integration, the demand for a single dominant language serves to regulate participation in the social and political sphere. It establishes language as both a gatekeeper and a marker of allegiance, linking communication to broader questions of identity and power. The resistance to alternative linguistic forms, such as regional or colloquial varieties, underscores the depth of this commitment to purity and control.

Against this backdrop, recent theoretical developments offer a reimagining of language that challenges its traditional boundaries. Drawing on posthumanist, feminist, and materialist perspectives, language is reconceived as an activity rather than an object, as something that happens rather than something that exists. This shift emphasizes the embodied and situated nature of communication, recognizing that language emerges through interactions that involve not only speakers but also bodies, spaces, and material conditions. The separation between mind and body, long central to linguistic theory, is dissolved, revealing a more integrated understanding of how meaning is produced. The concept of languaging captures this transformation. It foregrounds the processual character of communication, highlighting that language is always in motion, continually shaped by the contexts in which it is used. Rather than a fixed system of rules, languaging is an adaptive practice, responsive to the demands of interaction and the resources available. It encompasses the full range of semiotic activity, including gestures, spatial arrangements, and material objects, all of which contribute to the creation of meaning. In this sense, language is not contained within individuals or communities but distributed across the environments in which it operates.

This perspective also reconfigures the notion of the speech community. Instead of a stable group defined by shared linguistic norms, the community becomes a fluid network of interactions, constantly evolving as its members engage with different contexts and practices. Multilingualism and hybridity are no longer exceptions but central features of linguistic life, reflecting the interconnectedness of contemporary societies. The boundaries between languages become permeable, allowing for the emergence of new forms that defy traditional classification. The movement from language to languaging thus represents more than a conceptual shift; it is a

reorientation of how communication is understood in relation to the world. It challenges the authority of established categories and invites a reconsideration of the assumptions that underpin them. By focusing on process rather than structure, on relation rather than identity, this approach reveals the complexity of linguistic practices and their entanglement with social, political, and material conditions. Language, in this view, is not a fixed entity to be mastered but a dynamic activity through which individuals and communities continually negotiate their place in the world.

Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Burden of Belonging: Identity Between Languages

In Khawla Badwan's discussion of Language and Identity in a Globalised World from Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact, identity emerges not as a stable possession but as a fragile negotiation shaped by language, discourse, and the constant pressure to belong within socially constructed norms. The experience of living across languages reveals a fundamental tension: the desire for recognition collides with the impossibility of fully fitting into any singular linguistic or cultural frame. What appears as linguistic diversity is, at a deeper level, an existential condition of dislocation, where identity is continuously questioned, performed, and reassembled.

The reflections of Edward Said introduce the problem with striking clarity. To live within multiple languages is not merely to possess competence in them, but to inhabit worlds that do not fully reconcile. The question of whether one is "truly bilingual" exposes a deeper uncertainty: language is not simply a tool one can master equally, but a space that structures perception, belonging, and estrangement. The persistence of "strangeness" suggests that identity cannot be stabilized through linguistic proficiency alone. Each language carries its own boundaries, subtly resisting the seamless integration of the self. The result is not synthesis, but a permanent in-betweenness. This condition becomes intelligible when identity is understood as dependent on recognition. Individuals are not free to define themselves in isolation; they are positioned within discourses that categorize, normalize, and evaluate. Through what has been described as discourse identity, the self is shaped by how others interpret and name it. When these interpretations conflict—when one is simultaneously seen as insider and outsider—the individual experiences a fracture. The sense of not fitting the mold arises precisely because the mold itself is rigid, constructed through binary oppositions that divide the world into acceptable and deviant forms.

Such binaries, deeply embedded in Western traditions of knowledge, produce the illusion of stable categories: native versus foreign, normal versus strange, belonging versus exclusion. These oppositions are not natural but discursively produced, yet their effects are profoundly real. Language functions here as a regulatory mechanism, enforcing conformity to socially sanctioned ways of speaking and being. To deviate linguistically is to risk social marginalization, and this pressure begins early. The child who silences his home language in public does not simply make a linguistic choice; he performs an identity aligned with dominant expectations, internalizing the hierarchy that renders one language acceptable and another inappropriate. The importance of fitting into such molds cannot be dismissed, even as it is critically questioned. Social life demands a degree of conformity, and the fear of being marked as different exerts a powerful influence on behavior. Yet post-structuralist perspectives reveal that identity is never singular or fixed. It is composed of multiple subject positions that shift across contexts, making the demand for

consistency both unrealistic and oppressive. The challenge, then, is not to achieve coherence but to navigate multiplicity without succumbing entirely to the pressures of normalization.

The notion of building a "home" at the crossroads of languages offers a way of reimagining this condition. Instead of viewing in-betweenness as a deficiency, it becomes a mode of existence that embraces fluidity. To be at home in multiple linguistic and cultural spaces requires a balance between attachment and detachment, an ability to move without fully settling. This perspective transforms strangeness into a resource, allowing individuals to inhabit the world with a heightened awareness of its plurality. Yet such a stance remains difficult to institutionalize, particularly within educational systems that privilege uniformity and standardization. Education, with its rigid hierarchies and assessment mechanisms, reinforces the very molds that constrain identity. By valuing certain languages and forms of knowledge over others, it contributes to the marginalization of those who do not conform. The monolingualizing ethos prevalent in many systems exemplifies this dynamic, positioning dominant languages as gateways to success while devaluing others as obstacles. For mobile individuals, especially children, this creates a profound tension between home and school, between inherited identity and institutional expectation. The devaluation of one's native language is not merely a linguistic loss but an erosion of connection to culture, memory, and belonging.

Within this landscape, languaging offers a different perspective on identity. Rather than viewing language as a fixed marker of identity, it is understood as a practice through which identity is enacted. Language becomes a medium of emotional and relational expression, capable of opening spaces that transcend imposed roles. The experience of hearing a familiar language in an უცხ environment illustrates this vividly. A song, a phrase, or a sound can momentarily dissolve the boundaries between identities, creating an intimate space where the self is reconnected with its past. Such moments reveal that identity is not confined to social categories but is continually reconstituted through affective and sensory experiences. The relationship between language and identity is thus deeply entangled with both power and emotion. Individuals draw on their linguistic repertoires not only to communicate but to position themselves within different social and cultural landscapes. Each language carries distinct associations—intimacy, education, global mobility—and these associations shape how individuals experience and perform their identities. Yet these relationships are not neutral; they are influenced by historical and political forces that assign value to certain languages while marginalizing others. The tension between embracing a language for its opportunities and resisting it for its historical implications exemplifies the complexity of this process.

Ultimately, identity in a globalized world cannot be reduced to a stable essence tied to a single language or culture. It is a dynamic interplay of recognition, performance, and negotiation, constantly reshaped by the contexts in which individuals move. Language, far from being a neutral medium, is central to this process, both enabling and constraining the ways in which identity can be expressed. To understand identity, then, is to understand the shifting terrain of languaging, where belonging is never fully secured but always in the process of becoming.

Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The Tyranny of Language Blocks: Power, Mobility, and the Struggle to Speak

In Khawla Badwan's conclusion to Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact, language is revealed not as a neutral medium of communication but as a

contested terrain shaped by power, ideology, and movement, where individuals must constantly navigate invisible yet deeply consequential barriers that regulate who can speak, how, and with what legitimacy. The work positions itself both as a protest and an inquiry, exposing how language operates across individual, national, and transnational spheres, while simultaneously questioning the very assumptions that underpin its study and use.

At the core of this reflection lies a dual transformation in applied linguistics: the ontological and spatial turns. The ontological turn challenges the foundational assumptions about what language is, where it exists, and whose interests it serves. It destabilizes the long-held view of language as a fixed, bounded system, revealing instead its contingent and constructed nature. The spatial turn complements this by foregrounding the role of language in shaping experiences of place, belonging, and identity. Language is not simply used within spaces; it actively produces them, embedding individuals within networks of meaning that are always in flux. Together, these perspectives dismantle the illusion of linguistic stability and replace it with a vision of language as relational, dynamic, and deeply entangled with social life. One of the central critiques advanced is directed at the persistence of local and national biases in how language is conceptualized. The notion of place, often treated as fixed and bounded, becomes a site of exclusion when tied to rigid linguistic expectations. By contrast, a more fluid understanding of place—one that emerges through movement, interaction, and relation—opens the possibility for more inclusive and socially just perspectives. Language, in this sense, cannot be confined within national borders or historical narratives of belonging. It moves with people, reshaping itself and the spaces it inhabits, resisting attempts to anchor it in static frameworks.

This insistence on movement stands in direct opposition to the ideology of linguistic immobility, which serves as a mechanism of power. By portraying languages as fixed entities tied to specific groups or territories, dominant discourses create divisions between “us” and “them,” legitimizing certain forms of speech while marginalizing others. These divisions are not merely symbolic; they produce real consequences, subjecting mobile individuals to forms of symbolic violence that affect their sense of identity, belonging, and recognition. The suffering generated by these ideologies is not incidental but systemic, rooted in the ways language is theorized, taught, and regulated. Equally significant is the critique of discourses of mastery that seek to control language through claims of scientific authority. The attempt to categorize, standardize, and objectify language reflects a broader struggle for dominance, where knowledge becomes a tool of power. In this process, language is reduced to an object of analysis, stripped of its social and political dimensions, and reconstituted as a manageable entity. This “thingification” not only distorts the nature of language but also reinforces existing hierarchies, privileging certain forms while excluding others. The aspiration to mastery thus reveals itself as an illusion, masking the inherently unstable and evolving character of language.

Against this backdrop, the concept of “language blocks” emerges as a powerful metaphor for the barriers individuals encounter in their linguistic lives. These blocks are not physical obstacles but ideological constructs that regulate access to legitimacy. They dictate what counts as acceptable language, imposing standards that are often unattainable or exclusionary. The national language block enforces allegiance to a single linguistic identity, while the standard variety block privileges certain forms over others. The high-scale language block places additional demands on mobile individuals, requiring them to perform linguistic competence at elevated levels. The dominant variety block shifts depending on context, reflecting local hierarchies, while the expectation to sound articulate imposes aesthetic and social judgments on speech. Finally, the ideal of perfect bilingualism or multilingualism creates an impossible standard, turning linguistic diversity into a

site of deficiency rather than richness. These blocks function as mechanisms of control, shaping educational systems, employment practices, media representations, and academic discourse. They produce what has been described as "languagelessness," a condition in which individuals are rendered deficient regardless of their linguistic abilities. To speak is no longer sufficient; one must speak correctly, appropriately, and according to norms that are often inaccessible. In this sense, language becomes a site of exclusion, where participation is contingent on conformity to dominant expectations.

The recognition of these barriers does not lead to a simplistic call for their removal. Instead, the emphasis shifts to survival and resistance. To navigate language blocks is to engage in a continuous process of negotiation, where individuals adapt, resist, and reinterpret the constraints imposed upon them. Imperfection, rather than being a failure, becomes a site of possibility, allowing for new forms of expression that challenge dominant norms. The acknowledgment of one's own linguistic limitations is not an admission of deficiency but an acceptance of the inherently incomplete and evolving nature of language. This perspective extends to the role of researchers and educators, who are themselves implicated in the production of language ideologies. The frameworks used to describe language are not neutral; they shape what can be seen and understood. By questioning these frames—by asking why they exist, who benefits from them, and how they are maintained—it becomes possible to imagine alternative ways of engaging with language. The goal is not to replace one rigid framework with another but to move toward a more open and reflexive understanding that resists closure. In this vision, language is no longer a fixed system to be mastered but a living, amorphous phenomenon that reflects the complexities of human and social life. It is shaped by movement, conflict, and negotiation, and it cannot be fully captured within static categories. To rethink language in this way is to open up new possibilities for social justice, where linguistic diversity is not merely tolerated but actively valued. It requires a shift from viewing language as a resource to be managed toward seeing it as a shared space of interaction and becoming.

Ultimately, the conclusion calls for a transformation in how language is understood and engaged with, both within academia and beyond. By embracing fluidity, questioning authority, and recognizing the entanglement of language with power, it becomes possible to envision new forms of linguistic practice that are more inclusive and equitable. The task is not simply to study language differently but to live with it differently—to acknowledge its unpredictability, to resist its instrumentalization, and to create spaces where all forms of expression can be heard and valued.

Badwan, K. (2021) Language in a Globalised World: Social Justice Perspectives on Mobility and Contact. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. LANGUAGE USAGE

Shifting Patterns, Enduring Forces: The Flux That Forms Language

In Joan Bybee's A Usage-Based Perspective on Language, language is introduced not as a fixed architecture but as a phenomenon whose apparent regularity conceals an underlying dynamism, much like sand dunes whose forms persist even as their particles continuously shift. This comparison foregrounds a central insight: structure and variability are not opposing features but coexisting outcomes of the same generative forces. Language, like dunes shaped by wind and time, exhibits patterned regularities while simultaneously accommodating variation across languages, across constructions, and within individual utterances. These patterns are neither imposed nor designed in advance; rather, they arise from processes that operate repeatedly through use, giving

language both its coherence and its instability. From this perspective, any adequate theory must turn away from static descriptions and instead account for the dynamic processes that continuously produce linguistic form.

This reorientation toward process opens a broader explanatory horizon, one in which linguistic structures are no longer treated as autonomous entities but as consequences of domain-general cognitive mechanisms. These mechanisms are not exclusive to language; they function across cognition, shaping perception, memory, and categorization. When applied repeatedly in acts of language use, they leave traces in the cognitive system, gradually organizing and reorganizing linguistic representations. Thus, structure is not a given but an emergent effect, sedimented through countless instances of usage. The patterns observed in grammar are therefore inseparable from the history of their use, and the regularities that linguists describe are the stabilized outcomes of processes that remain active and ongoing. Seen in this way, language assumes the character of a complex adaptive system. Its resemblance to naturally evolving formations rather than engineered constructions lies in its pervasive gradience and variation. Categories do not present themselves as sharply bounded; instead, they stretch across continua where distinctions blur and shift. Elements move gradually from one category to another, as in the transitions between derivation and inflection or between independent words and bound affixes. At the same time, variation manifests synchronically, reflecting the multiple paths along which change is unfolding. These phenomena are not anomalies to be corrected but essential features of a system whose very stability depends on its capacity for transformation.

The examination of linguistic units reveals this principle with particular clarity. Morphemes, often assumed to be discrete building blocks, display significant internal variability. While canonical cases suggest a stable pairing of form and meaning, closer inspection uncovers a spectrum of behaviors. Lexical items such as go illustrate how a single form can extend across a range of constructions, gradually losing its independence and acquiring grammatical functions. Its presence in expressions like be going to or in quotative usage demonstrates how meaning can attenuate as form becomes integrated into larger patterns. What appears at first as a clear lexical unit reveals itself as a participant in an ongoing process of reclassification, where boundaries are continuously negotiated rather than fixed. Grammatical morphemes, traditionally defined by their restricted distribution, exhibit even greater variability. Their forms and meanings differ systematically across languages, reflecting diverse configurations along a continuum from analytic to highly inflected structures. Yet beneath this diversity lies a shared set of processes, particularly those associated with grammaticalization, through which independent words evolve into bound elements and gradually fuse with surrounding material. Within individual languages, similar continua persist, making it difficult to draw firm distinctions between categories. The ambiguity surrounding elements such as –ly or contracted negatives illustrates how even familiar forms resist clear classification. These cases reveal that linguistic categories are not static compartments but evolving zones shaped by usage and change.

At the margins of these categories, the gradience becomes even more pronounced. Some elements retain traces of their lexical origins while functioning within grammatical constructions, whereas others move in the opposite direction, losing semantic content and becoming indistinguishable from purely phonological material. The history of forms like seldom demonstrates how once meaningful components can fade into structural residues. These transformations are not merely historical curiosities; they provide insight into the cognitive processes that govern language. They suggest that repeated use reshapes mental representations, influencing how forms are stored, accessed, and organized. Language, in this sense, is not only a system of communication but also

a record of cognitive activity, continuously rewritten through experience. The heterogeneity of larger structural categories further reinforces this view. The English auxiliary system, often treated as a coherent and well-defined set, reveals upon closer inspection a remarkable diversity. Its members differ in form, function, and historical origin, encompassing modal verbs, aspectual constructions, and even elements that function as main verbs in other contexts. The boundaries of this category are not sharply drawn; certain verbs oscillate between auxiliary and main verb status, maintaining this duality over centuries. Such persistence of ambiguity indicates that gradience is not a transitional anomaly but a stable feature of linguistic organization.

Even within seemingly uniform subclasses, variation proliferates. Modal auxiliaries, while sharing structural properties, express a wide array of meanings, from ability and obligation to probability and temporality. This mismatch between form and meaning challenges the expectation that linguistic categories should align neatly with semantic distinctions. Instead, it reveals that categories emerge from historical layering and functional extension, accumulating diverse meanings while maintaining structural coherence. Similar patterns can be observed in other domains, such as prepositions, where elements vary widely in behavior and degree of integration. These examples demonstrate that heterogeneity is not an exception but a fundamental characteristic of linguistic systems. Variation also operates at the level of specific constructions, where individual instances acquire properties that distinguish them from the general pattern. Expressions that are structurally identical may diverge in usage, frequency, and phonetic realization. Highly frequent combinations can undergo reduction and semantic shift, developing discourse functions that are absent in less common variants. This differentiation underscores the role of usage frequency in shaping linguistic form, as repeated exposure leads to both phonetic erosion and functional specialization. The result is a landscape in which general constructions coexist with highly particularized expressions, each reflecting a distinct trajectory of use.

The accumulation of these observations leads to a decisive conclusion: gradience and variation are not peripheral complications but central to the nature of language. They arise from the same processes that generate regularity, and they coexist with it as complementary outcomes. To privilege one over the other is to misunderstand the system as a whole. Language is neither a rigid structure nor a chaotic flux; it is a dynamic equilibrium in which stability and change are continuously negotiated. Its patterns endure not because they are fixed, but because they are constantly reproduced through use, shaped by the very processes that also introduce variation. In recognizing this, we arrive at a conception of language that aligns with its cognitive foundations. It is a system formed through interaction, memory, and adaptation, where every act of use contributes to its ongoing transformation. The apparent permanence of linguistic structure is thus an illusion sustained by repetition, while beneath it lies a continuous process of reconfiguration. To understand language is therefore to understand this interplay between persistence and change, where the forces that alter it are the same forces that sustain it, and where every pattern is both a product of the past and a seed of future variation.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Grammar of Experience: How Use Becomes Structure

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, linguistic structure is explained not as a sealed mechanism unique to language alone, but as the visible result of general cognitive processes repeatedly activated through ordinary acts of speaking, hearing, remembering, and interpreting. The central question is not merely what language is, nor whether it serves thought or

communication, nor even whether it emerged suddenly or gradually, but whether the processes that form grammar belong only to language or whether they also operate across other domains of human cognition. The most cautious and productive answer begins with the broader processes first. Before inventing a special faculty for every grammatical pattern, one must ask how far categorization, memory, repetition, analogy, association, and practice can take us. If these ordinary cognitive forces can explain even part of linguistic structure, then the mystery of language becomes more precise, not less profound, because what remains specifically linguistic can be identified only after the general powers of cognition have been properly understood.

Language, from this view, is not a structure placed inside the mind like a completed machine. It is a complex adaptive system whose order emerges from repeated use. Grammar is therefore not prior to usage in the simple sense of being a fixed code that speakers merely apply. It is the cognitive organization of experience with language. Each utterance, each phrase, each familiar sequence, each context of use leaves some trace in representation. The speaker does not possess grammar as an abstract monument untouched by life; the speaker continually rebuilds grammar through encounters with actual linguistic events. This is why the study of linguistic structure must shift from the structure alone to the processes that create it. To understand language is not only to describe its forms but to ask what acts of cognition, repeated over time, have made those forms stable enough to appear grammatical. The first of these processes is categorization. Whenever a word, phrase, sound pattern, or construction is recognized, it is matched against stored representations. This act of matching is so basic that it may seem invisible, yet it is the foundation of the linguistic system. Sounds become recognizable units, morphemes become recurring signs, words become members of classes, and constructions become patterns because experience is sorted through similarity and identity. Categorization is not invented by language. Human beings categorize shapes, faces, movements, objects, situations, and sensations before and beyond speech. Language draws upon this same power, but it gives it a historical and social density, because the categories formed in language are constantly reinforced by repeated public use.

Chunking gives language another form of stability. Sequences that occur together again and again begin to cohere as larger units. What was once a sequence of separate elements may become accessible as a single cognitive package. This explains why practice makes complex actions easier, and why repeated linguistic sequences become formulaic expressions, constructions, and constituents. A phrase may begin as a combination, but repetition can make it feel like one unit. Yet this unity is never absolute. Some expressions remain transparent and analysable, while others become partially fused or opaque. The interaction of chunking and categorization therefore produces degrees of compositionality, not a simple opposition between free combination and fixed formula. Memory, in this account, is not thin or abstract. It is rich, detailed, and experiential. Speakers remember not only a word as a skeletal form but also phonetic details, contexts, meanings, associations, and inferences. Linguistic knowledge is built from exemplars, from accumulated experiences judged similar enough to belong together. Each use of language slightly affects the organization of memory. This is crucial because it dissolves the old separation between competence and performance. Actual use is not noise surrounding the real grammar; actual use is the material from which grammar is organized. The mind stores experience, and grammar is the patterned consequence of that storage.

Analogy then allows speakers to move beyond repetition. Novel utterances are formed by aligning previous experiences, identifying their parts, and extending their relations into new contexts. This process too is not limited to language. Human beings recognize relational similarities in visual scenes, shapes, colors, and situations. In language, analogy explains how creativity can arise from

memory rather than from an entirely separate generative mechanism. Speakers create new sentences because they have encountered patterns before, not because they operate outside experience. Innovation is therefore not the opposite of convention; it is convention reorganized through similarity. The link between form and meaning depends on cross-modal association. Experiences that occur together tend to become connected in cognition. A sound, a phrase, a scene, an intention, and an inference may become associated because they repeatedly appear together in use. Meaning attaches not necessarily to the smallest possible unit but to the largest available chunk: a word, phrase, or construction. This explains why entire expressions may acquire meanings that cannot be reduced neatly to their parts. Contextual inferences can become conventional meanings, and repeated situations can reshape the interpretation of forms. Language is therefore not merely a system of signs attached to meanings; it is a system of associations stabilized through use.

From these processes emerges a usage-based grammar. The construction becomes the central unit because it directly pairs form and meaning while allowing both fixed and open positions. A passive construction, a ditransitive construction, or a more specific pattern involving particular words and meanings can all be understood as constructions. This view rejects the need to separate syntax from semantics as if form and meaning lived in different compartments. Even phonological reduction may belong to a construction when it repeatedly occurs in that pattern. Levels of abstraction are not imposed from above but built from below, through categorization across similar instances of use. The consequence is that frequency matters. Highly frequent expressions can become entrenched; recurrent patterns can become productive; specific examples can gradually turn into independent constructions. The grammar of a speaker contains not only general rules but also detailed knowledge of particular combinations, their meanings, their contexts, and their phonetic shapes. Variation and gradience are therefore not failures of the system. They are represented within it. All variants can live in memory as clusters of exemplars, and these clusters may shift gradually as usage changes. Language change is not confined to childhood acquisition or to some distant historical process. It happens as language is used.

This also changes what counts as evidence. If grammar is based on linguistic experience, then child language, psycholinguistic experiments, speaker intuitions, corpora, and historical change all become relevant. No sharp wall can exclude so-called performance from the study of grammar, because performance is precisely where grammar is enacted, reinforced, and transformed. Corpora become especially important because they reveal the breadth and texture of actual experience with language. They show what speakers encounter, how often forms recur, what combinations become conventional, and how patterns distribute themselves across spoken and written usage. Language change becomes not a secondary topic but a central explanation. Every structure has a history, and part of understanding a structure is understanding how it came into being. The synchronic and diachronic dimensions are not separate worlds. The same cognitive processes that allow speakers to process language in the present also produce change over time. Repetition, reduction, inference, analogy, categorization, and chunking shape both the individual speaker’s system and the historical development of languages. Nothing in grammar is fully intelligible unless it is viewed in the light of change, because grammar is not a finished object but an evolving organization.

The intellectual background of this view reaches across functional linguistics, typology, grammaticalization studies, construction grammar, corpus linguistics, variationist methods, and theories of complex adaptive systems. These traditions converge on the idea that grammar is affected by use, that meaning and discourse function shape structure, that constructions emerge historically, and that quantitative evidence matters. The renewed attention to formulaic language

further demonstrates how specific and detailed linguistic knowledge really is. Speakers do not merely know abstract rules; they know countless combinations, preferred expressions, conventional sequences, and patterned reductions. The deeper question, then, is where grammar comes from. The answer offered here is neither mystical nor mechanical. Grammar comes from repeated acts of use filtered through general cognitive processes. It comes from memory, categorization, analogy, association, and the gradual binding of sequences into units. It comes from the particular becoming general without ever losing the traces of its particular history. In this framework, the task is to derive language from non-language, not in order to diminish language, but in order to understand how its extraordinary complexity can arise from ordinary cognitive forces acting through social repetition. Language is systematic because experience is organized; it is variable because experience is never identical; it changes because every use slightly reopens the system that it also helps preserve.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Memory of Speech: How Repetition Becomes Language

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, the usage-based understanding of language depends on the claim that every instance of use leaves some effect on the cognitive representation of language, so that grammar is not stored as a thin abstract code but as a dense record of lived linguistic experience. This position requires a different view of memory. Language is not remembered only as stripped-down forms, purified of variation, redundancy, accent, rhythm, context, and particularity. It is remembered richly. The mind stores phonetic detail, lexical combinations, constructions, meanings, contextual inferences, and social circumstances. What appears to the structural eye as accidental noise may, from the perspective of cognition, be part of the very material from which linguistic knowledge is built. The speaker does not encounter language as an abstract skeleton but as concrete utterances, pronounced by particular voices, in particular contexts, carrying particular associations. These experiences accumulate, and their accumulation is what allows language to become both stable and changeable.

This view stands in sharp contrast to the structuralist and generative traditions that dominated much of twentieth-century linguistics. Those traditions tended to treat redundancy and variation as material to be discarded. Their goal was to identify the rule, the contrast, the abstract pattern, and the minimal form necessary to account for grammatical structure. In such a model, the lexicon stored only what was idiosyncratic, while predictable information was removed from representation. Yet this economy of storage was more a methodological preference than a plausible account of what speakers actually do. A speaker cannot generalize without first encountering examples, and once those examples have formed the basis of a generalization, there is no reason to assume that memory erases them. Human memory in other domains does not work by destroying experience once abstraction has occurred. It preserves particularity alongside generality, and language should not be treated as an exception without evidence. The older argument for minimal storage was also supported by assumptions about limited memory. If memory were severely constrained, then redundant linguistic detail would have to be excluded. But this underestimates the immense capacity of the human brain. Speakers know enormous numbers of words, expressions, combinations, constructions, and conventional sequences. They remember not only isolated words but also preferred phrases, fixed expressions, collocations, and partially formed patterns. A few dozen grammatical markers or recurring formal distinctions are not an impossible burden. The problem is not that language contains too much detail for cognition; the problem is that linguistic theory often preferred not to see how much detail cognition can retain.

The role of imitation must also be reconsidered. In some traditions, imitation was treated as too simple to explain language, as though the ability to repeat what one has heard were a mechanical and inferior skill. Yet imitation is neither trivial nor uniquely primitive. Human imitation is extraordinarily complex. It requires attention, segmentation, recognition of variation, coordination of parts, and the capacity to reproduce patterns productively. Other animals show limited imitative capacities, but humans imitate rapidly and flexibly. This capacity helps explain the cultural homogeneity that makes language possible. To recognize the importance of imitation is not to deny creativity. Rather, it clarifies how creativity can arise from remembered and recombined experience. Language is learned not by imitation alone, but without imitation the transmission of linguistic form would lose one of its most powerful foundations. Experimental traditions once seemed to support abstract representation, especially in studies of categorical perception and verbatim recall. Early work on phonetic categories showed that listeners were especially sensitive to boundaries between phonemes, reinforcing the view that once a sound had performed its contrastive function, its acoustic details could be forgotten. Later research complicated this picture. Listeners can also discriminate within categories and judge degrees of fit. Phonetic categories have internal structure; some tokens are better examples than others, and multiple acoustic cues contribute to recognition. This means that speakers are sensitive not only to categorical contrast but also to fine detail within categories. Such sensitivity points toward memory built from many experienced tokens rather than from a single abstract phoneme emptied of variation.

The same reconsideration applies to verbatim memory. Earlier experiments were often interpreted as showing that listeners remember only meaning or gist, not the precise form of what they have heard. Yet later evidence shows that surface form is not simply lost. People can recognize clauses they have heard, reproduce parts of stories verbatim, and retain some exact wording even after delay. This does not mean that every utterance is perfectly recoverable, but it does mean that experienced forms have an effect on representation. Frequency itself makes this necessary. If repeated use strengthens a word, phrase, or construction, then even the first occurrence must leave some trace. Otherwise, frequency could never accumulate. A form cannot become frequent in memory unless memory has been registering its occurrences from the beginning. The theory of categories also supports this richer account. Prototype effects show that members of a category are not all equal; some are felt to be more central, others more marginal. Yet such effects need not be explained only by abstract prototypes. They can also arise from stored exemplars. Familiarity with one marginal member can help classify another marginal member because memory contains particular cases, not merely an ideal center. People also know that certain features tend to co-occur within categories, such as the association between small birds and singing. This kind of internal knowledge cannot be explained if only an abstract prototype is stored and all individual cases are discarded. The mind preserves category detail, and linguistic categories should be understood in the same way.

In phonology, exemplar models provide a particularly strong account of how experience shapes representation. Every token of linguistic experience affects memory. New tokens are matched with stored tokens judged similar, and clusters of exemplars form around words, sounds, and constructions. A word is therefore not stored as one abstract pronunciation but as a range of experienced phonetic forms connected to meanings, contexts, and uses. Some phonetic variants may become associated with particular social contexts or meanings; more often, a word possesses a cluster of related pronunciations that vary within a recognizable range. Language lives in this range. Its identity is not destroyed by variation; it is constituted through organized variation. Frequency plays a decisive role in this system. High-frequency words undergo reduction more readily and often change faster than low-frequency words. Sounds are deleted, weakened,

shortened, or overlapped more often in words and sequences that speakers use repeatedly. This is not accidental. Repetition produces articulatory practice, and practice tends toward economy. Gestures become smoother, more compressed, and more reduced. Because frequent words are exposed to this reducing tendency more often, they accumulate change more quickly. An exemplar model explains this naturally: each use slightly influences the stored cluster, and frequent use gives more opportunities for small changes to be registered.

Yet words do not change in entirely isolated ways. They follow broader phonetic tendencies within a language. Similar sounds in similar environments are connected across words, so variation can be both word-specific and system-wide. A word may have its own history of reduction, but it still participates in larger patterns shared by other words. This balance between the particular and the general is central to exemplar representation. Language is not a list of isolated accidents, nor is it a rigid system of abstract rules detached from use. It is a memory system in which specific experiences are grouped, compared, strengthened, and extended. The philosophical importance of this view lies in its reversal of linguistic abstraction. What was once treated as secondary becomes primary. The voice, the repetition, the context, the reduction, the phrase, the memory of exact wording, and the social scene of utterance all become part of language's cognitive reality. Grammar is not a clean object hidden behind speech; it is the organized residue of speech itself. Every utterance is both an event and a contribution to the system that will make future utterances possible. Language endures because it is remembered, but it changes because memory is not a stone archive. It is a living field of exemplars, constantly strengthened, reshaped, and redistributed by use.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Network of Use: When Memory Builds Grammar

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, morphology and syntax are not treated as separate mechanical layers imposed upon words and sentences, but as networks of associations that emerge from the remembered relations among forms, meanings, contexts, and repeated patterns of use. In an exemplar model, a word is not merely a unit stored in isolation. It is a cluster of phonetic experiences connected to semantic experiences, and this cluster may enter into many different relations with other words. Some relations are phonetic, some semantic, and some become morphological because similar forms also carry similar meanings. A past-tense suffix, for example, is not discovered as an abstract object first and then applied to words; it becomes visible because many words share both a final sound and a past meaning. Morphology arises from this convergence. It is not a hidden skeleton behind language but an emergent pattern formed from associations among remembered linguistic experiences.

This approach has the advantage of avoiding the illusion that every word must be completely divided into clean morphemic pieces. Some forms have partial relations without being exhaustively analysable. A past-tense form may connect with the general past pattern through one final consonant, even if the remainder of the word does not function independently as a meaningful base. A word may appear to contain a recognizable suffix even when the part before it has no separate meaning. This is important because real language does not always submit to tidy segmentation. It preserves traces, partial similarities, weakened connections, and historical residues. The grammar of the speaker therefore does not consist only of perfect divisions, but of relations of varying strength. Morphological relations are gradient because both form and meaning are gradient. Two words may sound similar but no longer feel strongly related in meaning. Another

pair may preserve a semantic connection while showing phonetic divergence. Derivational morphology often reveals this instability, since words related to a base may gradually move away from it in meaning, usage, and psychological accessibility. The question, then, is not simply whether a complex word is stored or generated. In a rich memory model, even complex and apparently regular words may have memory representations. The more important questions concern how strong those representations are, how strongly they are connected to other representations, and how these connections differ across speakers, frequencies, and contexts.

This is why words with similar apparent structure may behave differently. A prefix such as re- or un- does not guarantee the same degree of compositionality in every word that contains it. Some words remain transparently connected to their bases, while others become relatively independent because their frequency, context, or history has weakened the association. If a derived word is more common than its base, the relation between them may feel less analysable. If the base remains frequent, the connection may remain stronger. Such differences are difficult to capture in a rigid structural model, but they follow naturally from a network of exemplars where relations vary in strength. The same principle applies beyond individual words. Multi-word sequences may become familiar and conventional even when they contain no special or unpredictable meaning. Expressions such as common collocations, preferred combinations, and familiar phrases are known because speakers have encountered them before. They require memory not because they are irregular, but because they are conventional. Language users do not remember only exceptions; they remember patterns of ordinary use. A familiar sequence may be semantically transparent and still have cognitive presence as a stored expression.

Frequency produces another major effect: conservation. In exemplar models, each new token strengthens the representation it maps onto. High-frequency words, phrases, and constructions therefore become stronger than low-frequency ones. Stronger items are easier to access, which explains why frequent words are recognized more rapidly. But frequency also gives complex forms morphological stability. Irregular forms often survive precisely because they are frequent. A rare irregular form may fail to be accessed and may be replaced by a regular pattern, but a frequent irregular form remains available, entrenched, and resistant to change. Thus frequency does not only accelerate reduction in phonology; it can also preserve morphology by strengthening access to existing forms. Frequency also shapes analogy. The more frequent member of a paradigm tends to become the model for new formations. Singular nouns usually serve as the basis for new plurals, not the reverse. Present forms tend to serve as bases for regularized past forms, rather than past forms generating new presents. This reveals that grammar is not organized around abstract symmetry alone. It is organized around the forms that speakers encounter, retrieve, and use most often. The most accessible form becomes the analogical center from which new patterns extend.

Syntax too can be understood through networks of relations. An idiom such as pull strings has its own metaphorical meaning, but it remains connected to pull and strings as independent words. Its meaning is not simply the sum of its parts, yet its parts are not erased. These connections may weaken or strengthen depending on use, familiarity, and semantic transparency. When words occur together frequently, they also develop sequential relations. Repetition binds them into chunks, and these chunks can acquire phonetic, morpho-syntactic, and semantic properties of their own. Constructions are especially suited to exemplar representation because they pair form and meaning directly. A construction may include fixed elements and open positions. It may allow variation in nouns, verbs, adjectives, inflection, and phrase types while still remaining recognizable as a pattern. Speakers experience constructions not as abstract rules but as actual tokens. These tokens are mapped onto one another, forming clusters that represent both the fixed and variable parts of

the construction. The meaning of a construction is also built from repeated examples, from the meanings of the words that occur in it, and from the contexts in which the whole pattern is used. A resultative construction such as drive someone crazy illustrates this point. Individual expressions may vary in subject, tense, experiencer, and final adjective or phrase, yet they cluster around a recognizable form-meaning pattern. The subject may be almost any noun phrase; the verb drive appears in inflected forms; the experiencer is usually animate and often pronominal; the final element typically belongs to a semantic field of madness, frustration, or desperation. Some examples become especially frequent and therefore stronger. A phrase like it drives me crazy may be stored as a familiar sequence within the larger construction. Thus the general pattern and the specific expression coexist.

Evidence for exemplar representation in syntax appears in idioms, prefabricated expressions, and the emergence of new constructions. Idioms require direct representation because their meanings are not fully predictable. But predictable expressions also require representation when they become conventional through repeated use. A phrase can be ordinary and still remembered. More importantly, new constructions arise from specific exemplars of older constructions that acquire new meanings, implications, or forms in particular contexts. The construction what is X doing Y? shows how meaning can develop from use. Formally, it resembles an ordinary question, yet it often conveys surprise, incongruity, and disapproval. These meanings are not directly stated in the words themselves. They arise from repeated contexts in which such questions are used to challenge or question the appropriateness of a situation. Over time, the inference becomes associated with the construction. This is possible only if speakers remember not merely forms but also contextual implications. Rich memory allows pragmatic inference to become conventional meaning. Specific instances may also become conventionalized before undergoing further development. A familiar expression can be repeated, varied, adapted, and used as a cultural template. Once a particular example of a construction becomes memorable, speakers can alter it while preserving its recognizable structure. Such cases show that grammar is not only a system of abstract categories but also a field of remembered formulations. The particular can become a model for new uses, and repeated examples can become the source of new grammatical possibilities.

Grammaticalization provides an even stronger case. A lexical item inside a construction may gradually take on grammatical status. The development of be going to into a future marker shows that change does not happen to every use of go, but to a specific construction in which go occurs with progressive form and a following infinitive. At first, the construction expresses physical movement with purpose. Gradually, repeated uses allow intentions, predictions, and future meanings to become associated with the form. Phonetic reduction follows, as going to becomes gonna, and the construction expands into contexts where no literal movement is present. For such changes to become permanent, the relevant phonetic, pragmatic, and semantic properties must be registered in memory as they develop. The construction slowly loses its connection to literal movement and to other uses of go. It becomes an independent grammatical pattern. This loss of connection is gradual, not abrupt. Speakers may still recognize the historical relation, especially in writing, but ordinary use does not necessarily activate the older meaning. The construction has been reorganized through repetition. What was once a lexical sequence becomes a grammatical unit.

This process also changes constituency. Items that occur together frequently come to be processed together. The sequence going to becomes a unit not only phonologically but also syntactically. As the motion meaning weakens, the following verb is reinterpreted as the main verb. This reanalysis is not a sudden intellectual decision made by speakers. It is a gradual change in the exemplar

cluster, produced by repeated experience with the construction in new contexts. At every level of grammar, then, rich memory representation offers an explanation for variation, gradience, stability, and change. Phonetic detail is stored. Morphological relations vary in strength. Frequent forms resist regularization. Specific constructions acquire meanings from repeated contexts. Expressions become conventional even without irregularity. New grammatical patterns emerge from old ones through gradual shifts in form, meaning, and association. Grammar is therefore not a set of clean rules floating above speech. It is a network of remembered uses, strengthened by repetition, shaped by analogy, and transformed by the very acts that preserve it.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Creativity of Resemblance: How New Speech Grows from Old Patterns

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, analogy is presented as the cognitive process through which speakers extend already experienced constructions into new utterances, not by applying detached symbolic rules, but by relying on similarity to stored examples of previous language use. Language is creative, but its creativity is not born from emptiness. It arises from remembered patterns. The speaker who produces a new utterance does not invent language anew; rather, the speaker reaches into a dense field of prior expressions, familiar combinations, stored constructions, and partially schematic frames, then extends them toward a new situation. What appears as novelty is therefore deeply dependent on memory. The new is carried by the old, and linguistic invention proceeds through resemblance.

Constructions are built through chunking, but they are not made only of fixed material. They contain schematic positions, open places where words, phrases, or other constructions may appear. These positions are not abstract blanks without history. They are categories formed from previous experience. Every item that has appeared in such a position contributes to the shape of the category, and every new item must be judged, consciously or unconsciously, against that accumulated history. This is why productivity is gradient. A novel item may sound natural, odd, possible, strained, or unacceptable depending on how closely it resembles earlier uses of the construction. Analogy, in this framework, names the process by which a speaker uses a new item in an existing pattern. It differs from rule-governed productivity because it depends heavily on similarity to stored exemplars. A new expression such as that drives me bananas does not simply obey a general rule. It enters a construction already filled with expressions involving madness, irritation, or loss of control. Its acceptability depends on its semantic proximity to expressions such as drives me crazy or drives me mad. The same principle appears in morphology when a form such as leaped is produced by extending a familiar past-tense pattern, and in phonology when a pronunciation such as nucular is influenced by familiar sub-word patterns such as popular, regular, or binocular. Across these levels, analogy shows that speakers create by adapting what they already know.

Although analogy is often described through neat proportional formulas, real linguistic analogy rarely works in such a clean four-part manner. Speakers usually do not summon three forms and calculate a fourth. More often, they extend a pattern because the new item resembles a cluster of stored examples. The objects involved are not arbitrary. Linguistic analogy depends on phonological, semantic, and structural similarity. A new verb cannot enter an irregular past-tense pattern unless it shares relevant phonological features with existing members. A new adjective cannot enter a resultative construction unless its meaning belongs near the semantic field already established by previous examples. Thus analogy in language is not pure relational transfer; it is resemblance guided by the stored texture of experience. This helps explain why many utterances

are less novel than theories of infinite creativity sometimes suggest. Actual speech contains a remarkable amount of prefabricated material. Speakers rely constantly on familiar chunks, conventional expressions, collocations, idioms, verb-particle combinations, fixed pairings, and recurring frames. A sentence may look freely assembled, yet much of it may be accessed as stored material. The ordinary flow of speech is not a sequence of isolated choices but a weaving together of ready-made units and locally adapted patterns. Language is creative, but it is also deeply formulaic. Its freedom is built upon its habits.

This does not diminish human linguistic creativity. It explains how it works. Novel utterances are often based closely on previous utterances, especially in early language acquisition, but the same principle remains active in adult language. Speakers extend patterns by similarity, sometimes staying close to familiar formulas, sometimes moving further away. Morphological innovation offers clear evidence. English verbs that join certain irregular past-tense classes do so because their phonological shape resembles existing members. Similarity may involve final consonants, syllable structure, vowel pattern, or even the general shape of the whole word. No single feature explains everything, because language processing has a holistic component. Speakers do not attend only to one linear position; they respond to overlapping patterns of resemblance across the form. The same item-based logic appears in compound formation. When speakers must create a new compound, they draw on families of existing compounds. The first element may strongly influence the form of the linking element because previous compounds with that same first element activate a model. The second element may also exert influence, though less strongly. Such cases show that speakers do not necessarily use explicit rules to form new combinations. They compare the new need with stored families of similar forms, weighting the possibilities according to prior experience. The grammar is therefore not a bare rulebook but a network of analogical pressures.

At the level of constructions, semantic similarity becomes especially important. Spanish expressions of becoming show that verbs combine with adjectives not by broad abstract rules alone, but by local clusters of conventional pairings. A frequent phrase can serve as the analogical center for less common extensions. A verb used conventionally with an adjective meaning nervous may also appear with adjectives meaning pale, hysterical, furious, or flushed, because these meanings belong to a neighboring field of bodily and emotional change. Another verb may cluster around meanings of being alone, isolated, unmarried, or without companionship, while also forming a separate cluster around surprise or astonishment. These are not necessarily unified by one broad feature. They are organized by local resemblance to established combinations. Acceptability judgments reveal the same pattern. Speakers tend to accept conventional expressions and low-frequency expressions that resemble conventional ones more readily than low-frequency expressions with no clear similarity to familiar patterns. What sounds acceptable is therefore not determined only by an abstract rule. It is shaped by memory, frequency, and resemblance. The mind asks, in effect, whether it has heard something like this before, whether this new item belongs near an existing cluster, whether the construction’s history can stretch far enough to include it.

This also shows the limits of explaining creativity through schematic abstraction alone. Constructions certainly develop abstract slots, but abstraction is not the whole story. Categories may expand through family resemblance rather than through a single general definition. New clusters may form around particular prefabricated expressions. A construction may grow in one semantic direction because one familiar phrase becomes a model, then grow in another direction because a different phrase becomes another model. The category is not always a clean hierarchy. It may be a field of overlapping centers, each radiating possible extensions. The dispute, then, is not whether language has generality. It clearly does. Some constructions become highly schematic

and highly productive. The question is whether this requires a separate system of symbolic rules detached from exemplars. A usage-based view says no. Even the most general patterns can arise from exemplar clusters that have become fully schematic through repeated use. Their productivity is real, but it is historically built, gradually acquired, and still marked by irregularities. This makes them unlike timeless symbolic rules and more like stabilized achievements of usage.

Analogy therefore joins memory and creativity. It explains how language can be both conventional and open-ended. Speakers do not need to choose between repeating stored formulas and generating sentences by abstract machinery. They do both at once, because stored formulas themselves provide the basis for extension. The familiar becomes a template; the template becomes a construction; the construction becomes a field of possible innovation. Every new utterance tests the reach of the old ones. Some extensions are accepted, repeated, and strengthened. Others remain strange, fail to circulate, and disappear. The philosophical force of this argument is that linguistic creativity is not the opposite of habit. It is the disciplined transformation of habit. Language changes because speakers recognize similarities, stretch patterns, and allow new expressions to inhabit old forms. Grammar is not destroyed by novelty; it is renewed by it. The speaker's freedom lies not in escaping memory, but in using memory analogically. What has been said before becomes the condition for saying what has not yet been said. In this way, language remains both inherited and inventive, both patterned and unfinished, both an archive of previous utterances and a machine for producing the next one.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Child of Repetition: How Analogy Learns to Speak

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, analogy is shown not only as a mechanism of adult creativity and historical change, but also as a central process in child language, where general grammar gradually grows from specific utterances, repeated expressions, and locally familiar patterns. From a usage-based perspective, the child does not begin with abstract rules fully detached from experience. The child begins with what has been heard, repeated, remembered, and partially understood. Early speech is therefore not a miniature version of adult grammar governed by invisible general principles. It is a field of concrete expressions, lexical anchors, and learned sequences from which broader constructions slowly emerge. The child's grammar begins in particularity.

Research on child language shows that early multi-word productions are often organized around specific words and familiar expressions. Young children do not immediately demonstrate possession of generalized rules that can operate freely across all possible lexical items. Instead, their utterances frequently cluster around patterns such as there's a X or I want a Y, while many others are simply rote-learned expressions. This suggests that the first constructions are not abstract schemes but remembered frames. The child speaks by reusing parts of prior speech, adjusting them, extending them, and gradually discovering which positions can vary. In this way, analogy becomes the bridge between repetition and productivity. The study of children's questions makes this process especially clear. Many child questions are direct repetitions of adult questions, delayed repetitions, or repetitions of the child's own earlier speech. Yet even when children produce novel questions, these new forms can often be derived from previously recorded utterances through simple operations. One operation is juxtaposition, in which two units are placed together in a linear sequence. The other is superimposition, in which one unit fills a schematic position inside another. These operations show how novelty can arise without requiring a fully

abstract grammar from the beginning. A child may take a familiar frame and insert a new phrase into it, or combine two known units into a new utterance. The result is creative, but it remains visibly dependent on memory.

As children grow, their constructions become more abstract. Older children begin to show sensitivity not only to particular words but also to broader structural patterns. A six-year-old may be influenced by hearing an active or passive construction and then reproduce the same structural type, while younger children remain more dependent on the lexical items they have just heard. This indicates that abstraction develops through experience. General patterns are achieved slowly, after many encounters with particular words, pronouns, phrases, and constructions. But abstraction does not erase the specific examples from which it emerged. The child does not need to throw away remembered expressions once a more general pattern is formed. Concrete exemplars and abstract constructions can coexist in the same grammar. The same analogical processes that operate in child language also operate in adult speech. Adults too fill schematic slots, combine constructions, and extend familiar patterns into new contexts. Superimposition, in particular, appears to be a major source of complex structure, because it allows one construction or lexical item to elaborate another. Hierarchical structure, then, need not be imagined as something imposed from above by a separate mechanism. It can arise from the repeated use of constructions that contain open positions, gradually filled and extended through analogy.

Historical change reveals the same principle over longer time. In traditional historical linguistics, analogy often refers to changes in morphological paradigms, especially levelling and extension. Levelling occurs when an irregular alternation is replaced by a more regular form, as when leapt competes with or gives way to leaped. But this is not simply the loss of an alternation. More precisely, a speaker creates a new regular form by applying a productive construction to the most accessible base form. The old form may remain for a long time, competing with the new one. This gradual competition shows that change is not instantaneous replacement but a redistribution of forms in memory and use. Frequency plays a decisive role. Low-frequency irregular forms are more vulnerable to regularization because they are less accessible. High-frequency irregular forms resist change because their representations are stronger. This explains why frequent forms preserve older patterns longer than rare forms. The same logic applies beyond morphology. Specific exemplars of older constructions may survive even after a newer construction becomes more productive, simply because repetition has made them strong. What remains in a language is not always what is most regular; it is often what is most entrenched.

Analogical extension, by contrast, occurs when an irregular or minor pattern attracts new members. This is less common than levelling, but it shows how limited productivity works. A pattern is unlikely to expand if it has only one example. It requires a cluster, a core set of forms strong enough to attract new items. Productivity therefore depends partly on type frequency: the more items participate in a pattern, the more available the pattern becomes for extension. But type frequency interacts with schematicity. A highly schematic construction, such as the regular English past tense, can apply broadly because it is not restricted by the phonological shape of the verb. A less schematic pattern, such as an irregular vowel change class, can expand only to forms that resemble its existing members. The English strong verbs show this clearly. Some irregular classes have lost members through regularization or disappearance, while one class has gained new members because its surviving forms share enough phonological similarity to attract others. Verbs ending in velar consonants, often with additional similarity at the beginning of the word, may enter this pattern. Such extension is not free. It depends on resemblance, clustering, and the force of a group. A pattern with many similar members can exert a kind of collective pull, drawing in new

forms that resemble the cluster. This prevents language from becoming completely regular. Regularization and irregular extension coexist, creating a tension between broad productivity and local analogy.

Morphosyntax shows similar competition. Older and newer constructions may coexist for centuries, with the older pattern preserved in frequent expressions or specific contexts while the newer pattern spreads more widely. English negation offers an example. One strategy uses not after an auxiliary or dummy do, while another uses no or a negative indefinite. The not construction became more productive historically, yet the older negative incorporation pattern remains strong in particular constructions such as existential be, stative have, and copular be, as well as in frequent or conventional expressions. Phrases such as have no, know nothing, make no mistake, or make no mention survive not because they are generated anew by a fully productive old rule, but because they are entrenched exemplars. This survival of older patterns supports the exemplar model. If grammar consisted only of general rules, it would be difficult to explain why certain specific expressions preserve older constructions while others shift to newer ones. But if speakers store particular constructions and sequences, then frequency and familiarity can preserve them. The older form continues where it has become strong enough to resist replacement. Thus language change does not simply eliminate the past. It carries the past forward in reinforced expressions, idioms, constructions, and lexical habits.

Analogy can also create new constructions. A single entrenched expression may become the center from which a broader pattern expands. In Spanish, a construction involving quedarse with adjectives appears to have begun with expressions meaning to be left alone. From that center, the pattern extended to meanings involving being left widowed or orphaned, then to phrases expressing deprivation, such as being without heirs, without weapons, or without other possessions, and eventually to more abstract states. The development begins with a concrete expression and grows through analogical extension. The semantic field expands step by step, not by sudden rule formation but by resemblance to prior uses. This shows that analogy as historical change is not separate from analogy as cognitive processing. Languages change only because speakers use them. When a pattern spreads through time, it does so through individual acts of production and comprehension in which speakers extend what they know to new circumstances. Historical analogy is cognitive analogy repeated across generations. The same process that allows a child to form a new question, or an adult to produce a novel phrase, also allows a language to develop new constructions.

The philosophical importance of this account lies in its refusal to separate learning, creativity, and history. The child's first patterned utterances, the adult's novel expressions, the survival of old irregular forms, and the birth of new constructions all belong to the same continuum. Language is not transmitted as a finished grammar but as a living inheritance of remembered forms. The mind receives expressions, stores them, strengthens them, compares them, and extends them. Some become entrenched; some become productive; some fade; some survive as fossils of older systems; some become the seeds of new grammar. Analogy is therefore not a minor repair mechanism for irregularities. It is one of the basic ways language lives. It allows the particular to become general without ceasing to be particular. It allows memory to become innovation without breaking its bond with use. The child learns grammar by moving from remembered utterances toward broader patterns; the language changes by moving from entrenched expressions toward new constructions. In both cases, speech grows from what has already been said, and the future of grammar is formed by the analogical pressure of its past.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Rule That Remembers: How Analogy Turns Exceptions into Evidence

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, the opposition between analogy and rules becomes a way of asking whether linguistic productivity must be explained by abstract symbolic mechanisms or whether it can be understood as the extension of remembered patterns from specific experience toward broader generalization. An exemplar model directs attention to the relation between the particular and the general. Languages certainly contain highly general patterns, but these patterns do not need to be treated as independent rules existing above the forms they organize. They can be understood as the historical and cognitive outcome of more local patterns, gradually widened through repeated use, similarity, and analogical extension. The general does not descend upon language from outside experience; it grows out of the accumulated force of specific cases.

This view changes how exceptions are understood. In a rule-based model, exceptions often appear as problems that must be explained away, hidden beneath altered underlying forms, or assigned to a separate lexical store. In an analogical model, exceptions are not embarrassments. They are evidence. They reveal the uneven strength of forms, the persistence of frequent expressions, the survival of older constructions, and the competition among patterns. A high-frequency item may resist change because it is strongly entrenched. A minor pattern may remain alive because a cluster of similar forms supports it. A new construction may arise from one repeated expression and then compete with a more general pattern. Exceptions therefore do not weaken the theory; they disclose the history of use that produced the system. Some linguistic theories accept analogy for minor or irregular patterns but preserve symbolic rules for highly productive morphology and syntax. This creates a dual system: analogy for the lexicon and symbolic rules for the abstract grammar. The difficulty is that such a division must explain where one mechanism ends and the other begins. Usage-based theory instead proposes a continuum. Patterns may be unproductive, weakly productive, semi-productive, highly productive, or nearly general. Their productivity depends on type frequency, similarity among members, schematicity, and entrenchment. There is no need to divide grammar into two separate worlds when the same analogical mechanism can account for both restricted and general patterns.

The difference between analogy and symbolic rules can be seen most clearly in how each treats stored experience. Analogy depends on stored exemplars. Similar forms and constructions are grouped together, and these groupings may develop prototype structure, with central and peripheral members. The pattern exists because the remembered items support it. It has no life independent of the forms from which it emerges. A symbolic rule, by contrast, is imagined as independent of the forms it applies to, located in a separate component of grammar. From the usage-based perspective, this separation is unnecessary. The schema is not outside the lexicon or constructional inventory; it is the organization of that inventory. Productivity also differs in the two accounts. In an analogical model, productivity is affected by the number of items participating in a pattern. A schema that covers many different verbs is more productive than one covering only a few. Productivity is therefore gradient. It is not simply present or absent. In a rule-based model, productivity is often tied to default status, as if a child identifies a rule used for new forms and then applies it broadly. But actual linguistic behavior shows degrees of productivity, partial extension, competition, and sensitivity to the specific forms already known.

Analogy is also shaped by the details of existing items. A novel form is more likely to enter a pattern if it resembles strong or central members of that pattern. Speakers do not apply analogical patterns blindly to whole categories such as noun or verb. They respond to phonological shape,

semantic proximity, constructional history, and the density of similar examples. This is why analogy is probabilistic. A form may be close to a pattern, marginally compatible with it, or too distant from it. Rules, in contrast, are usually described as discrete: a form either belongs to the relevant category or it does not. But language use rarely behaves with such clean boundaries. The same contrast appears in syntax. Phrase structure rules are traditionally purely syntactic and separated from meaning. Constructional analogy cannot accept such a separation, because constructions are pairings of form and meaning. Their syntactic relations are grounded in the contexts in which they have been used and in the meanings they have acquired. The structure of a construction is not empty form. It carries semantic and pragmatic history. To use a construction productively is not merely to arrange words in a permitted order; it is to activate a remembered relation between form, meaning, and context.

Frequency gives analogy one of its most important constraints. High-frequency forms are less likely to undergo analogical change than low-frequency forms. This is the conserving effect of token frequency. Every use strengthens the exemplar cluster of a word, phrase, or construction, making it easier to access. A strong stored form is likely to be retrieved as it is, rather than replaced by a more compositional or more regular alternative. This explains why frequent irregular forms survive while rarer ones regularize. Repetition protects them. Frequency does not always simplify language; sometimes it preserves complexity. This conserving effect must be distinguished from the reducing effect of frequency. Frequent sequences may undergo phonetic reduction because repeated articulation leads to overlap, shortening, and weakening of gestures. At the same time, frequent forms may resist analogical replacement because their memory representations are strong. Thus frequency has two different consequences: it may erode phonetic substance while preserving morphological or constructional identity. The same repeated use that wears down the sound may strengthen the stored form.

Analogy, then, is not a marginal process used only when rules fail. It is the central mechanism by which speakers create novel utterances from conventionalized expressions and constructions. Much speech and writing consists of prefabricated sequences, and these sequences provide the material for analogical extension. Children use analogy to move from repeated utterances toward broader constructions. Adults use it to produce new expressions. Historical change uses it whenever speakers extend, preserve, regularize, or reshape patterns over time. The same process operates in morphology and syntax, synchronically and diachronically. The philosophical force of this argument lies in its refusal to separate creativity from memory. Language does not require two minds: one that stores exceptions and another that applies pure rules. It requires a memory capable of organizing experience, comparing forms, strengthening patterns, and extending similarities into new uses. The general is not opposed to the particular; it is the particular repeated, associated, abstracted, and made available for further speech. Grammar is therefore not a law imposed on language but a history of usage that has become productive. Its rules, if we still call them rules, are rules that remember where they came from.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Birth of Grammar: When Use Becomes Structure

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, constructions are explained through the unity of synchrony and diachrony, because grammar cannot be understood as a finished system unless one also studies the processes of change that continually create it. Language, when viewed as a complex adaptive system, is not an object standing still before the analyst. It is an organization in

motion, a self-forming system whose structures emerge from repeated acts of use. For this reason, language change cannot be treated as an appendix to linguistic theory. It is not something that happens after grammar, outside grammar, or against grammar. It is one of the central ways grammar becomes visible. Change reveals cognitive representation, but it also produces the very patterns that later appear to be synchronic structure.

The study of grammar therefore requires the integration of synchrony and diachrony. A language at any moment contains the traces of its own history: older patterns preserved in frequent expressions, newer constructions expanding into broader domains, meanings shifting through repeated inference, and forms becoming reduced through repetition. If linguistic categories are gradient and variable, then change is not an external disturbance but part of the system itself. The present state of a language is a temporary arrangement of ongoing processes. What seems stable is often only change slowed down by convention. The clearest example of this is grammaticalization, the process by which lexical items or sequences of items become grammatical morphemes and create new constructions. A lexical expression does not become grammatical in isolation. It becomes grammatical inside a particular construction. English going to does not become a future marker in every use of go. It grammaticalizes only in the construction where a form of be is followed by going to and another verb. I am going to the gym remains a movement construction, while I am going to help you belongs to the path that leads toward future meaning. The distinction is crucial: grammaticalization is not merely the weakening of a word, but the transformation of a construction.

The future marker be going to developed from a purpose construction involving movement toward an action. A phrase such as they are going to see the king originally involved both motion and purpose. Over time, the motion sense weakened, while intention and futurity became stronger. The modern construction no longer requires movement at all. It may refer simply to a predicted future event. In this process, a new grammatical morpheme and a new construction arise together. Since grammatical morphemes are defined by the constructions in which they occur, grammaticalization must always be understood constructionally. The importance of grammaticalization lies in its ubiquity. It occurs in all languages, at all times, affecting many aspects of grammar. Cross-linguistic studies show that unrelated languages often develop similar grammatical meanings from similar lexical sources. Future markers commonly arise from movement verbs or verbs of volition. Progressives often come from locative expressions. Perfects and pasts may emerge from resultative expressions or verbs meaning finish. These parallels are not accidental. They show that similar cognitive and communicative pressures operate across languages, even where the languages themselves are historically unrelated.

Grammaticalization takes place during language use. It is not a sudden event but the cumulative result of several processes operating together. A particular instance of a construction becomes more frequent, more autonomous, and less analysable. It is repeated until it becomes chunked. As chunking strengthens, phonetic reduction occurs. Going to becomes gonna; want to, have to, and supposed to undergo similar reductions. Older examples show the same principle: grammatical endings may originate in reduced auxiliary forms. Reduction follows from automatization. Repeated articulatory sequences become smoother, more compressed, and less fully pronounced. Chunking also changes the internal organization of the expression. The parts become less transparent and less connected to their independent uses elsewhere. The have in have to no longer behaves exactly like the have of possession or the have of the perfect. The sequence develops its own distribution, meaning, and phonological behavior. This growing autonomy is one of the signs

that a new construction is forming. What was once assembled from separate elements becomes processed as a unit.

Semantic change accompanies this process. Some meanings weaken or disappear. Gonna no longer necessarily indicates movement. Will no longer means wanting in its future use. Can no longer always carries its older sense of knowing how. The article a no longer explicitly means one in all contexts. This loss or weakening of older meaning is often called bleaching. It happens as a construction spreads into new contexts. The more widely a form is used, the more general its meaning becomes. Frequent use also produces habituation: repeated expressions lose some of their original semantic force, which allows them to apply to still more contexts. Yet grammaticalization is not only loss. It also involves gain. Meanings that were once merely inferred from context may become part of the construction itself. Communication is never completely explicit. Speakers imply, hearers infer, and repeated inferences become conventional. In the case of be going to, contexts involving purposeful motion often implied intention. If a speaker said that they were going to deliver a letter, the intention to perform the act was naturally inferred. Through repetition, this inference became part of the meaning of the construction. Later, the construction could express intention or prediction even without literal movement.

This is why constructions are the proper unit for explaining grammaticalization. A construction joins phonetic form, morphosyntactic pattern, semantic meaning, pragmatic inference, and context of use. Grammaticalization affects all of these at once. It changes pronunciation, constituency, meaning, distribution, and implication. An exemplar model is especially appropriate because it can represent variation across uses. A construction may retain older meanings in some contexts while developing newer meanings in others. Its phonetic forms may range from fuller pronunciations to reduced forms. Its meanings may shift gradually, with different uses gaining or losing frequency over time. The central mechanisms of grammaticalization all depend on repetition: chunking, phonetic reduction, autonomy, generalization to new contexts, habituation, and pragmatic inference. These processes feed one another. Increased use strengthens chunking; chunking promotes reduction; semantic generalization expands contexts of use; expanded contexts increase frequency; frequency accelerates further change. This self-feeding movement gives grammaticalization its momentum. Grammar emerges not because speakers design it, but because ordinary usage repeatedly pushes forms along paths of greater conventionality, abstraction, and grammatical function.

At the same time, grammaticalization explains both similarity and difference among languages. Similar sources often produce similar grammatical meanings because human cognition, embodiment, and communicative inference provide recurring paths. But the exact source matters. A future derived from go may retain different nuances from a future derived from want. A recently grammaticalized future may strongly suggest intention, while an older one may have lost that sense almost entirely. Thus grammaticalization creates typological patterns without erasing linguistic individuality. Languages resemble one another because they are shaped by similar processes; they differ because those processes operate on different materials in different histories. The larger lesson is that grammar arises from usage just as structure arises in a complex adaptive system. Repeated speech events gradually mold lexical material into grammatical constructions. Forms become chunks, chunks become reduced, meanings generalize, inferences become conventional, and constructions gain autonomy from their sources. The structures that later appear as grammar are therefore the sedimented results of ordinary acts of speaking and understanding. Grammar is not a mysterious architecture hidden behind language. It is the long memory of use, organized by repetition, reshaped by inference, and carried forward by change.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The History Inside Grammar: Why Constructions Explain What Rules Conceal

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, grammaticalization is presented as one of the strongest explanations for why grammatical structures have the particular forms they do, because many morphosyntactic patterns cannot be fully understood from synchrony alone. A language at one moment may look arbitrary, irregular, or strangely organized, but this is often because its present structure is the residue of an earlier construction. Grammar carries its own history inside it. What appears as a rule in the present may be the fossilized result of a sequence of older uses, reductions, inferences, and reanalyses. For this reason, diachrony does not merely decorate linguistic explanation; it often provides the only explanation available.

New constructions arise from specific instances of older constructions, and because of this they inherit many of their properties. The order of elements, the position of particles, the distribution of auxiliaries, and the competition between alternate forms may all reflect the constructional source from which a newer pattern developed. English negation illustrates this clearly. The position of not after the auxiliary or copula is not best explained by an abstract synchronic principle. It must be traced historically to Middle English, where not developed from a negative element combined with an indefinite pronoun meaning something or someone. Since that pronoun functioned as the object of the verb in a verb-object order, the negative element followed the verb. Later, the construction became restricted to auxiliaries and copulas, leaving modern English with the familiar pattern in which not follows the first auxiliary or copular element. The same historical development also explains why English has more than one sentence-negation strategy. The newer not construction came into competition with older negative incorporation patterns such as no longer, nothing, no one, and related forms. This competition remains visible today in pairs such as I know nothing and I don't know anything, or there were no funds and there weren't any funds. These alternatives are not accidental duplications. They are the surviving evidence of different historical layers. To explain why both constructions exist and why each has its present properties, one must understand the grammaticalization processes that created and redistributed them.

Grammaticalization also explains typological patterns across languages. Word order correlations, often treated as synchronic universals, can be understood historically. Auxiliary verbs develop from main verbs that take other verbs as complements. In languages where objects and complements tend to precede the verb, the developing auxiliary follows the main verb. In languages where complements follow the verb, the developing auxiliary precedes the main verb. If these auxiliaries later become affixes, they tend to become suffixes in one type of language and prefixes in another. Thus grammaticalization supplies the order without requiring an additional abstract principle. The historical source of the construction explains the synchronic pattern. Even apparent exceptions confirm the importance of diachrony. When a perfect or perfective marker comes from a verb meaning finish, it may become a suffix even in a language whose general word order would suggest a different pattern. The reason lies in the original sequence: the action is expressed first, and the verb finish naturally follows it because completion comes after the completed act. The grammatical form preserves this older iconic ordering. Such cases show that cross-linguistic generalizations are not mechanical laws imposed on grammar from above. They are historical tendencies produced by recurring paths of grammaticalization.

This explanatory power challenges structuralist and generative assumptions. If grammar is treated as a system of discrete abstract rules, grammaticalization appears troublesome because it reveals

gradualness, variability, semantic drift, phonetic reduction, pragmatic inference, and overlapping constructions. But these are not defects in the data. They are the facts that a theory of grammar must explain. A usage-based theory, built around constructions and rich variation among instances, is far better suited to this task because it treats grammar as emergent, dynamic, and shaped by use. Critics sometimes argue that grammaticalization is only an epiphenomenon, a name for several changes that also occur independently: phonetic reduction, semantic bleaching, pragmatic inference, and changes in distribution. This objection is partly correct but not damaging. Grammaticalization is indeed not one single mechanical process. It is a convergence of processes. The crucial point is that these processes repeatedly co-occur because they are driven by usage and frequency. Repetition strengthens chunking; chunking encourages reduction; reduction and semantic generalization expand contexts of use; repeated inference becomes conventional meaning. The co-occurrence itself demands explanation, and usage-based theory provides it. A deeper criticism claims that there can be no diachronic processes, because processes must belong to individual minds, not to history across generations. But this objection depends on the assumption that language changes only during acquisition. If change occurs through use by speakers of all ages, then diachronic processes are simply the cumulative result of mechanisms operating repeatedly in individual acts of speech and interpretation. No speaker needs to possess a racial memory of language history. Speakers only need to use language in ways that slightly reshape stored representations. Across many speakers and many uses, these small changes become historical direction.

This also clarifies the issue of unidirectionality. Grammaticalization overwhelmingly tends to move from less grammatical to more grammatical forms. Lexical items become grammatical markers; independent sequences become bound constructions; concrete meanings become more abstract. Reversals are rare and usually limited. Critics who locate all change in child acquisition struggle to explain this directionality, because children do not know the historical path of a form. But if adults also participate in change through repeated use, the problem disappears. The mechanisms of chunking, reduction, inference, habituation, and generalization continue operating in every generation. Directionality belongs not to inherited historical knowledge but to the ordinary pressures of language use. The claim that there is no grammaticalization theory also fails for the same reason. Grammaticalization requires a different theory of grammar, one that abandons the idea of an abstract, fixed, discrete system separated from performance. It leads directly to usage-based grammar, where synchrony and diachrony are inseparable. The present form of grammar is understood through the historical processes that created it, and those processes are understood through the cognitive mechanisms active in present usage. This theory makes diachronic predictions, but it also changes synchronic description. It explains why categories are gradient, why constructions vary, why older forms persist, why meanings become layered, and why grammar changes without ever leaving ordinary speech.

The philosophical lesson is that grammar is not a timeless order but a historical organization of use. Its structures are not arbitrary because speakers irrationally preserve disorder; they are historical because language remembers its own transformations. Every construction has a path, every particle has a source, every irregularity may be a clue, and every synchronic pattern may be the visible surface of a diachronic process. Grammaticalization reveals that grammar is not built once and then used. It is built by being used.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Slow Revolution of Use: Why Speakers, Not Generations, Change Grammar

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, the source of linguistic change is placed not primarily in child acquisition but in language use itself, where gradual shifts in probability, repetition, distribution, and convention reshape grammar across speakers and across time. Empirical studies show that change usually proceeds slowly, with long periods of variation before one form becomes dominant or nearly categorical. This gradualness is difficult for structural theories, because if grammar is imagined as a set of discrete, non-variable underlying structures, then change ought to be abrupt. Yet languages do not usually change by sudden replacement. They change by small adjustments in the frequency and distribution of forms. A construction gains ground; another retreats. A variant becomes more common in one context before spreading to another. A phrase becomes stronger through repetition, while another fades because fewer speakers encounter it.

The idea that children are the main engine of linguistic change arises naturally from theories in which adult grammar is fixed, abstract, and separated from use. If adults cannot alter grammar, then change must occur when children acquire language imperfectly or restructure the input they receive. But the empirical evidence for this claim is weak. Studies comparing child language with historical change show some similarities, but they also show important differences. Children's phonological patterns, for instance, do not simply reproduce the sound changes found in adult languages. Certain tendencies common in child speech do not become normal sound changes in adult systems, while sound patterns common in adult languages may not appear in child language at all. Morphology and syntax show the same mixed picture. Children sometimes begin with basic or unmarked forms and extend them, which resembles certain analogical changes. But they also produce forms that do not continue into older child or adult speech. Historical development and child acquisition may follow parallel paths in some cases because both are shaped by cognitive accessibility, concreteness, frequency, and discourse context. Yet this does not mean children are responsible for historical change. It means that children and adults may respond to some of the same pressures. The similarity is real, but it is not proof of causation. The development of periphrastic causatives in English illustrates this complexity. Some patterns appear early both historically and in child language because they are concrete and accessible. Other patterns develop in a different order. A form may arise late historically but appear early in children, or the reverse. Such evidence undermines the idea that acquisition simply recapitulates linguistic history. The child's grammar is shaped by the child's own experience and cognitive limits, while historical change is shaped by repeated use across a whole community of speakers. These processes may intersect, but they are not the same.

Semantic and pragmatic change in grammaticalization also points away from very young children as the main source of change. Many grammatical meanings arise through inference, implication, and discourse-pragmatic reasoning. Such meanings often require interpretive abilities that develop later. If grammaticalization depends on repeated pragmatic inference in actual communicative contexts, then adult speakers must play a major role. They are the ones who repeatedly use constructions in contexts where new implications become attached, conventionalized, and eventually grammatical. A usage-based account predicts that children will acquire variation from the input rather than replacing it with abrupt new systems. This is exactly what studies of ongoing variation show. Young children often produce variants with probabilities that reflect adult speech. They acquire phonological constraints early and social constraints later, but they do not typically move from categorical forms to variation as if they had invented a new discrete grammar. Their speech mirrors the patterned variability around them. Even preschool children may show adult-like constraints on sound deletion, alternations, and stylistic variants. This means that children are

sensitive to probabilities in usage. They acquire not only forms but also the likelihood of forms in particular contexts. Some studies show that variation is tied to lexical entries themselves: high-frequency words show more reduction or deletion than low-frequency words, even in children's speech, just as in adult language. This supports the exemplar view. Children store detailed experiences with particular words and structures, and their productions reflect the distributions they hear. Acquisition is not a rupture between generations but a continuation of the variable system already present in the speech community.

Evidence from Tok Pisin strengthens this point. If first-language learners were the primary source of grammatical change, one would expect them to innovate differently from second-language users. Yet studies of the future marker bai show that first-language and second-language speakers move the language in the same direction at similar rates. This suggests that change is not confined to children acquiring a first grammar. All users participate in change when they repeatedly use forms in ways that alter their distribution and grammatical status. Language change should therefore be seen as a continuous flow rather than a series of generational breaks. The very notion of a generation is too simple, because children hear language from speakers of many ages, and adults continue to encounter new patterns throughout life. Adult linguistic behavior is routinized and therefore resistant to dramatic restructuring, especially in phonology. Yet adults can and do change. They may increase the use of an innovative pronunciation, adopt new pronouns or expressions, extend constructions to new lexical items, or participate in the rising frequency of a newer pattern. Morphosyntax and lexical choice are especially open to such change. The spread of you guys as a second-person plural form in American English shows how adults can adopt a construction because it becomes frequent in their experience, even if they initially resist it. Similarly, adults can creatively extend constructions in everyday speech, increasing their type frequency and helping them spread. The expansion of expressions such as drive someone up the wall or related resultative patterns depends on adult usage as much as on acquisition. Historical developments such as the spread of periphrastic do in questions and negatives also show gradual extension in adult language rather than sudden intergenerational replacement.

This does not mean children contribute nothing. New generations may help redistribute forms, extend constructions more freely, and abandon low-frequency patterns that they rarely encounter. If a construction becomes too rare in the input, it may fail to enter the younger speaker's active repertoire. The decline of shall in American English illustrates how low frequency and available alternatives can lead to loss. Children inherit the probabilities of the language around them, but where the probability becomes too low, inheritance may fail. Still, the social position of young children makes it unlikely that they alone create large-scale changes across adult communities. Children generally accommodate to older speakers rather than imposing their own innovations on them. Adolescents and pre-adolescents are often more advanced in change because they have greater social agency and may use linguistic forms to express group identity or resistance to norms. Language change is therefore social as well as cognitive. It occurs through use, but use is distributed across communities, ages, identities, and contexts. The conclusion is that a theory of grammar must include diachrony, not as an external supplement but as a necessary part of understanding structure. Language is a conventional cultural object that has evolved and continues to evolve. Its grammar originates in repeated word combinations, contextual use, conventionalization, automatization, habituation, categorization, and the gradual emergence of morphemes and constructions. As soon as words are combined in context, the possibility of grammar begins. Repetition turns sequence into expectation, expectation into construction, and construction into grammar.

Thus linguistic change is not an accident that happens to grammar after grammar is formed. It is one of the ways grammar exists. Speakers change language by using it, by repeating it, by adapting it, by preserving some forms and neglecting others, by allowing frequencies to shift, and by letting inferences become meanings. Children receive this moving system and continue it, but they do not alone create it. Grammar is not transmitted as a frozen structure from one generation to the next. It is maintained and transformed by every act of use.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Auxiliary Threshold: When Old Verbs Become New Grammar

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, the development of the English auxiliary is presented as a case in which grammatical reanalysis should not be understood as a sudden hidden change, but as the gradual creation of new categories through repeated use, grammaticalization, and shifting constructional patterns. The traditional notion of reanalysis often imagines grammar as changing abruptly beneath the surface, while outward forms alter only slowly. This view depends on the assumption that grammar itself is discrete, fixed, and sharply organized. If categories are absolute, then a language either has an auxiliary category or it does not. But the history of English suggests something different. It shows that grammatical categories may emerge gradually, through overlapping constructions, competing patterns, and quantitative changes in usage.

The study of grammaticalization makes this gradual view necessary. New grammatical markers and constructions do not appear all at once. They develop through reduction, inference, repetition, semantic weakening, and the gradual strengthening of particular patterns. What is often called reanalysis is better understood as the slow reshaping of a category, not as an invisible rupture in grammar. If grammar itself includes gradience and variation, then there is no need to imagine a hidden abrupt event. The changing distribution of forms is not merely surface noise; it is the grammar changing in public. The English auxiliary is especially important because it appears, in modern English, to form a closed class with clear morphosyntactic behavior. Auxiliaries invert with subjects in questions and take negation directly after them. This seems like the kind of category that should exist as a fixed grammatical unit. Yet historically, its members did not develop together, nor did they share a single semantic identity. The category includes modal auxiliaries, perfect and progressive constructions, the copula, and formerly possessive have. These elements entered the category through different historical paths and at different rates. The category did not descend into English fully formed. It accumulated.

The modal auxiliaries began as verbs, though by the Old English period many already had special properties distinguishing them from ordinary verbs. Forms such as shall, may, can, dare, and must belonged to a class whose present-tense forms historically resembled past-tense patterns, a sign of earlier semantic change. Their meanings also belonged to domains that frequently lead to grammaticalization: obligation, power, ability, knowledge, possibility, and necessity. At first, these verbs could function as main finite verbs or occur with another verb. Over time, the second use became more frequent, while their independent verbal behavior weakened. They gradually lost lexical autonomy and became more grammatical. This process did not occur uniformly. Shall grammaticalized earlier than will, even though both came to express future meaning. May developed epistemic meanings earlier than can. Each modal had its own trajectory, its own pace, and its own semantic path. This unevenness matters because it shows that the auxiliary category was not created in one step. It formed through the increasing frequency and grammaticalization of

individual members. As clauses containing modals became more common, English speakers encountered more and more clauses with an auxiliary-like element before the main verb. The experience of the language shifted before the category became fully stabilized.

The perfect construction also contributed to this development. Originating in a resultative construction, the periphrastic perfect continued to grammaticalize through Middle English. The progressive was also beginning to develop, though it was still relatively rare in the period under discussion. Together with the modals, these constructions increased the number of clauses containing an element that stood apart from the main verb and helped organize tense, aspect, modality, or clause structure. The auxiliary category therefore emerged not from one source but from the convergence of several grammaticalizing constructions. Negation played a crucial role. In Old English and early Middle English, sentence negation was expressed with a preverbal particle. Later, a reinforcing negative expression developed from a negative element combined with a pronoun meaning someone or something. This form became not. Since it originated in object position, it followed the verb. At first, it appeared together with the older preverbal negative; later, the older marker disappeared and not alone became the negator. Thus modern English negation grew from an older verb-object construction. Its position after the finite verb was inherited from its historical source.

Because not followed the finite verb, it naturally followed the emerging modals and other auxiliary-like verbs. At a time when these elements were still treated largely as verbs, the new negative construction helped place them in a special grammatical position. The more frequent modal and auxiliary constructions became, the more often speakers encountered the pattern in which negation followed this auxiliary-like element rather than an ordinary main verb. In this way, negation helped differentiate the emerging auxiliary class. Questions contributed another historical layer. Old English already had a construction in which the finite verb appeared before the subject in questions. This inversion applied to all verbs, not only to auxiliaries. Early Modern English still preserved examples of main verbs before subjects, as well as developing auxiliaries in the same position. Originally, then, question formation did not require a special auxiliary category. It required inversion of the finite verb. The modern pattern, where only auxiliaries invert with the subject, is a restricted descendant of an older, more general construction.

The development of the auxiliary therefore cannot be reduced to one sudden reanalysis. It involved the grammaticalization of modals, the spread of perfect and progressive constructions, the rise of postverbal not, and the restriction of an older subject-verb inversion pattern. New constructions emerged, older ones narrowed, and frequent items preserved patterns longer than less frequent ones. The category auxiliary was created through these interactions. This history shows why quantitative distribution matters. A grammar is not only a set of permitted structures; it is also a system of probabilities, frequencies, and entrenched patterns. As modals became more frequent, as not spread, and as do later entered questions and negatives, speakers' experience of clause structure changed. The auxiliary category emerged because certain forms repeatedly occupied certain positions in certain constructions. Repetition made the category real.

The philosophical significance of this development is that grammar does not need a secret moment of transformation in order to change. Categories can be born gradually. A language may pass through long periods in which a class is only partly formed, only partly restricted, only partly distinct from older patterns. What later appears as a firm rule may once have been a statistical tendency, a preferred construction, a frequent alignment of forms. The English auxiliary is not simply a grammatical category; it is a historical achievement of usage.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Grammar of Convergence: When Cognition, Culture, and Use Shape Language

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, language is presented as a complex adaptive system in which cross-linguistic similarities arise not from fixed universal structures imposed in advance, but from the repeated interaction of cognition, culture, and use. Any theory of language must explain what all human languages have in common, but it must also explain why they differ so profoundly in structure, category, order, and expression. A theory that merely declares universals at the level of abstract grammar does not fully explain the empirical diversity of languages. The more promising approach is to search for the cognitive and social processes that repeatedly produce similar patterns across different languages while still allowing each language to follow its own historical path.

Usage-based theory begins from the observation that grammar is deeply specific. Speakers know particular words, phrases, constructions, idioms, prefabricated expressions, and conventional patterns. Much linguistic knowledge belongs not to language in general but to a particular language, a particular community, and a particular history of use. Construction grammar emphasizes that grammar itself is often idiomatic, while studies of formulaic language show how much speakers rely on remembered sequences. Child language research also supports this view, showing that children begin with specific expressions and only gradually arrive at more general constructions. Yet this emphasis on local specificity does not deny that languages resemble one another. The question is how such resemblance emerges without assuming a fixed universal grammar already built into the mind. The answer lies in repeated usage filtered through domain-general cognitive processes. Human beings categorize, chunk, infer, associate, symbolize, remember, and extend patterns analogically. These processes are not exclusive to language. They operate across cognition, but in language they act upon speech events, social interaction, cultural convention, and repeated forms. When similar cognitive processes are applied again and again in different communities, similar grammatical tendencies may arise. But because the material, history, culture, and communicative practices differ, the outcomes are never identical. Cross-linguistic similarities are therefore real, but they are emergent and dynamic, not static and predetermined.

This view differs sharply from theories that treat universals as innate structural knowledge. If grammar is assumed to contain built-in categories, phrase structures, or movement constraints, then language acquisition becomes the place where those structures appear, and language change must be located mainly in children. But the evidence of gradual change, gradient categories, variable constructions, and adult participation in linguistic change weakens this position. Grammatical categories do not appear as fixed innate objects. They develop from other categories, from constructions, from repeated usage, and from historical change. Their properties are often gradual rather than discrete. This makes static universal grammar a poor fit for the actual behavior of language. A more economical theory begins by trying to derive language from non-language. This does not reduce language to something simple. It means that before proposing a special language-specific mechanism, one must first ask how far general cognition, perception, memory, inference, and social use can explain linguistic structure. Some abilities may eventually prove specific to language, especially in speech processing, but the burden is to identify them only after domain-general explanations have been explored. In a complex adaptive system, large-scale order arises from many local interactions. Grammar is one such order. This also transforms the idea of linguistic universals. There are very few absolute universals. Instead, languages show tendencies,

probabilities, implicational patterns, recurring pathways, and partial convergences. These are exactly what one would expect if multiple cognitive, communicative, and cultural forces shape languages over time. Languages do not fall into pure types. They cluster, overlap, drift, and reorganize. Their similarities are not the result of identical blueprints but of recurrent pressures acting on different materials.

The contrast between Chomsky and Greenberg is important here. Chomsky searched for universals through the idea of an innate grammar, whereas Greenberg studied large numbers of languages in order to discover actual patterns of similarity and difference. The Greenbergian approach is more compatible with usage-based theory because it does not stop at observation. It asks how typological patterns arise historically. It connects synchronic distribution with diachronic development. It seeks not merely to list universals but to explain the pathways that produce them. Grammaticalization provides one of the clearest explanations for such cross-linguistic patterns. Across unrelated languages, similar lexical sources often develop into similar grammatical markers. Demonstratives may develop into noun class markers. Movement verbs may develop into future markers. Verbs of desire may also become futures. Locative expressions may become progressives. Resultative expressions may become perfects or past tenses. These similarities do not require an innate grammatical rule saying that languages must have these forms. They require repeated cognitive and communicative conditions: movement toward a goal is easily associated with future action; location in an activity is easily associated with ongoing action; completion is easily associated with result and anteriority. Such pathways resemble attractors in a complex system. Languages may repeatedly move toward similar solutions, but never in exactly the same way. A future derived from a movement verb may preserve traces of intention, direction, or imminence in one language, while another may generalize the meaning further. A grammatical form may remain independent in one language and become an affix in another. A path may begin similarly but diverge because of cultural practice, frequency, discourse habits, or interaction with other constructions. Similarity and difference are therefore produced together.

Culture also matters. If language emerges through use, and use occurs inside communities, then social and cultural factors cannot be ignored. Patterns of interaction, narrative habits, literacy, social hierarchy, ritual speech, contact with other languages, and communicative expectations all influence what becomes frequent, conventional, and grammatically important. Cognition provides the processes, but culture provides the environments in which those processes operate. The same human capacities may therefore produce different grammatical outcomes under different cultural conditions. The philosophical consequence is that language is neither an abstract universal machine nor a collection of isolated local accidents. It is a historical, cognitive, and cultural system in motion. Its universals are tendencies born from repeated processes; its differences are the record of particular histories. Grammar emerges where memory, categorization, inference, repetition, and social convention meet. The commonality of human languages lies not in a rigid structure shared in advance, but in the shared human capacities that continually create structure through use.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Frequency of Form: How Usage Becomes Universality

In Joan Bybee's Language, Usage and Cognition, grammaticality, frequency, and universals are brought together through the argument that cross-linguistic patterns emerge from repeated usage, because what speakers frequently say becomes conventionalized, elaborated, and productive, while what is rarely said may weaken, become marginal, or disappear. In a usage-based theory,

grammaticality is not a rigid line drawn between the possible and the impossible. It is gradient. Expressions, constructions, and combinations are judged acceptable according to familiarity, and familiarity depends on frequency of experience and similarity to already established patterns. A rare construction may sound awkward not because it violates an eternal law of grammar, but because it lacks sufficient support in memory, usage, and analogy.

This means that the boundary between very low frequency and ungrammaticality is not sharp. A construction that is uncommon in one language may be unacceptable in another. A pattern that is highly frequent may become deeply conventionalized and productive, while a rare pattern may survive only in fixed phrases. Some constructions, such as transitive clauses or possessive constructions, are robust across languages because human beings regularly need to talk about actions, participants, ownership, relation, and transfer. Other constructions vary widely because the discourse habits and cultural needs that sustain them vary. Frequency is therefore not merely a statistical detail. It is one of the forces that makes grammar. What people tend to talk about helps shape grammatical structure. Narration favors perfective forms; habitual states favor present forms; conversation gives special prominence to first-person forms because speech is often subjective, personal, and interactional. Such patterns affect the stability and autonomy of grammatical categories. Forms that are constantly used become strong, resistant, and central. The grammar of a language is therefore partly shaped by recurrent human concerns: action, possession, identity, memory, desire, relation, and social positioning.

The way speakers organize discourse also influences what becomes grammatical. Human agents are often chosen as topics, and topics tend to appear early. This helps explain why subject-before-object order is common across languages. Similarly, discourse strategies may determine how argument roles are marked, how referents are introduced, and how later mentions are reduced or encoded through agreement. Grammar grows from repeated ways of managing attention. It is not simply a formal arrangement of words, but a conventionalized record of how speakers guide listeners through information. Relative clauses provide a powerful example. Some languages allow relativization only on subjects, others on subjects and direct objects, and others on a wider range of roles such as indirect objects, obliques, genitives, or objects of comparison. Within English, the more accessible types are also more frequent in use. This suggests that what is frequent within one language may correspond to what is grammatically available across languages. The usual explanation may refer to processing ease, semantic accessibility, structural complexity, or discourse function, but in every case frequency is the bridge between usage and grammar. What speakers do often becomes conventional; what they almost never do may become impossible.

A discourse-based explanation shows why subject and object relatives are so common. Relative clauses often serve to establish a referent as relevant by connecting it to information already present in the discourse. They identify, characterize, or anchor a person or thing within a shared field of reference. Because certain roles serve this function more naturally and frequently, they become more accessible for relativization. Languages that restrict relative clauses may therefore be preserving the most frequent discourse functions while leaving rarer ones undeveloped. Culture also affects grammatical possibility. In smaller, more intimate communities, shared knowledge may reduce the need for explicit referential strategies. In larger, more complex societies, more explicit constructions such as relative clauses may become more useful and therefore more developed. Grammar is shaped not only by cognition but by the social world in which cognition operates. The structures of language reflect the conditions under which speakers must make themselves understood.

The specificity or generality of meaning also influences frequency. Highly specific categories, such as dual number, tend to occur less often and are more vulnerable to loss. Highly generalized grammaticalizing forms become more frequent and may lose their older lexical meanings. English modal auxiliaries, for example, lost many ordinary verbal properties as their meanings became more abstract and their grammatical functions more central. A form that becomes too general may no longer behave like the lexical item from which it came. Frequency and semantic bleaching push it into grammar. Processing ease also shapes usage. Speakers tend to prefer structures that are easier to process, such as keeping related elements close together. A verb and its complement are more easily interpreted when they remain adjacent. Constructions that are easier to process become more frequent, and frequent processing preferences can become grammatical conventions. What begins as a preference in performance may become part of grammar through repetition. Languages also conventionalize different ways of packaging thought for speech. Some languages regularly encode direction in motion verbs, while others emphasize manner of motion. Some languages make extensive use of serial verb constructions, while others use them only marginally. These differences do not mean that one group of speakers needs certain meanings more than another. They show that communities develop habitual ways of presenting experience. Once a pattern becomes conventional, it can expand and shape further grammatical possibilities.

The larger conclusion is that linguistic universals are strongest when stated not as fixed structural laws but as recurring paths and processes. Particular constructions are language-specific, yet similar constructions arise across languages because they often come from similar diachronic sources. Future markers may share a predictive function, but they differ according to whether they developed from movement, desire, obligation, or some other source. Their meanings, restrictions, and forms depend on their history. The path explains both the similarity and the difference. Even deeper than the paths are the mechanisms that create them: chunking, phonetic reduction, habituation, generalization, inference, categorization, and association. These processes operate across languages because they belong to human cognition and usage. They shape analysability, compositionality, autonomy, schematicity, productivity, and prototype effects in constructions. Every language has constructions that vary along these dimensions, even though the particular constructions themselves are historically specific. Thus linguistic structure emerges from massive repetition in real communities. Categorization groups experiences into words and constructions. Chunking binds repeated sequences into units. Association connects forms with meanings, contexts, and inferences. Cultural habits determine what is talked about, how discourse is organized, and which forms become useful enough to survive. Grammar is therefore not a static universal blueprint. It is the organized consequence of embodied speech, repeated in time, remembered by minds, and stabilized by communities.

Bybee, J. (2010) Language, Usage and Cognition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3. LANGUAGING

The Illusion of the Named: When Language Becomes an Object

In Nigel Love's On Languaging and Languages, the inquiry begins by dismantling the assumption that languages exist as stable entities, proposing instead that what we call "a language" is the retrospective product of our own reflexive activity about linguistic behavior, an activity deeply shaped by the practices of writing and analysis that transform fluid interaction into discrete, nameable units. The argument unfolds from a deceptively simple example, a phrase that appears ordinary yet resists any singular interpretation, revealing how meaning is never contained within

words themselves but emerges through shifting contexts, perspectives, and uses. This instability is not an anomaly but a fundamental condition of what we habitually call language.

The phrase that anchors the opening reflection functions less as an object of analysis than as a demonstration of how quickly linguistic certainty dissolves. What seems like a stable sequence of words becomes, upon inspection, a site of ambiguity at multiple levels: syntactic, semantic, and contextual. It can be parsed differently, interpreted metaphorically or literally, and even reassigned to another linguistic system altogether. The apparent unity of the expression fractures under scrutiny, exposing the illusion that linguistic units possess inherent, fixed identities. What appears as a "thing" dissolves into a multiplicity of possible relations. This example leads to a more radical claim: languages themselves are not pre-existing systems that speakers draw upon, but constructs that arise from the ways we talk about language. The shift from languaging to language marks a movement from activity to abstraction, from process to object. It is through reflexive practices—naming, describing, classifying—that we begin to imagine languages as bounded entities composed of identifiable parts. These practices do not merely describe linguistic reality; they actively produce it in conceptual form. Central to this transformation is the role of writing. Writing detaches linguistic expressions from the immediacy of interaction, allowing them to be preserved, compared, and analyzed independently of their original contexts. This decontextualization enables the abstraction of patterns and the identification of recurring forms, which are then reified as elements of a system. Words, sentences, and grammatical structures come to be treated as if they exist independently of the situations in which they are used. What was once an event becomes an object, and what was once contingent becomes fixed.

Modern linguistics has largely accepted the outcomes of this process as if they were discoveries rather than constructions. The categories it employs—phonemes, morphemes, syntactic structures—are often treated as real entities that exist in the minds of speakers, guiding their linguistic behavior. Yet this assumption reverses the direction of explanation. Instead of recognizing that these categories arise from analytical practices, they are projected back onto speakers as the underlying causes of their ability to use language. The result is a theoretical framework in which the abstractions of analysis are mistaken for the foundations of linguistic activity. This reversal has significant consequences for how language is understood in relation to cognition. If linguistic units are treated as stored mental objects, then language use becomes a matter of retrieving and combining these objects according to pre-existing rules. Such a view obscures the dynamic, context-dependent nature of languaging, reducing it to the execution of an internalized system. It also raises questions about how such a system could be acquired, stored, and accessed, leading to increasingly complex and speculative models of mental representation. By contrast, the perspective advanced here suggests that what needs explanation is not the existence of an internal system but the observable practices of communication themselves. Languaging is not the output of a system; it is the activity from which the idea of a system is derived. This shift in perspective challenges the foundational assumptions of much linguistic theory, calling into question the very ontology of its central objects. Languages, on this view, are not entities that exist independently of human activity but conceptual artifacts that emerge from our attempts to make sense of that activity.

The notion of reflexivity is crucial to this argument. Humans are not only capable of engaging in linguistic interaction but also of reflecting on that interaction, describing it, and codifying it. This reflexive capacity allows for the development of metalanguage—the language we use to talk about language—which in turn shapes how language is conceptualized. Metalanguage does not merely represent linguistic reality; it actively structures it, determining what counts as a linguistic unit and

how these units are related. The concept of different "orders" of language further complicates the picture. At one level, there is the immediate activity of languaging, embedded in specific contexts and interactions. At another level, there are the abstractions derived from this activity, organized into systems and categories. The relationship between these levels is not one of simple correspondence. The higher-order constructs do not mirror the lower-order activities; they transform them, imposing coherence and stability where none inherently exists. Whether these constructs are useful depends not on their fidelity to an underlying reality but on their explanatory power and practical applicability. The critique extends to the broader implications of treating languages as objects. When languages are reified, they can be counted, compared, and ranked, leading to hierarchies that reflect social and political values rather than linguistic realities. The idea of a language as a bounded system supports notions of purity, standardization, and ownership, which in turn influence educational policies, identity formation, and power relations. The abstraction of language thus has consequences that extend far beyond the domain of linguistic theory.

What emerges from this analysis is a call to reconsider the foundations of how language is understood. Rather than beginning with the assumption that languages exist as entities composed of discrete units, it may be more productive to start with the observable practices of languaging and the reflexive processes through which these practices are conceptualized. This approach does not deny the utility of linguistic categories but situates them within the broader context of human activity, recognizing them as tools rather than truths. The challenge, then, is not to replace one ontology with another but to remain attentive to the processes through which linguistic realities are constructed. By acknowledging the role of reflexivity and the influence of writing and analysis, it becomes possible to see languages not as given objects but as ongoing achievements of human interaction and interpretation. In this light, the question is no longer what a language is, but how the idea of a language comes to be, and what effects this idea produces in the world.

Love, N. (2004) On Languaging and Languages. Department of Linguistics, University of Cape Town.

The Speaking Self: Personhood Forged in the Act of Languaging

In David Bloome and Faythe Beauchemin's Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms, the central claim unfolds with precision: language is not a system we possess, but an activity through which we become persons, an ongoing process of interaction in which identities are continuously negotiated, affirmed, or diminished. The shift from language to languaging marks a decisive departure from structuralist assumptions, relocating meaning from abstract systems into the lived immediacy of social encounters. What matters is not what language is, but what people do with each other through it, and how these actions shape the contours of human presence in shared spaces such as the classroom.

This reconceptualization reframes the classroom itself. No longer a neutral site for the transmission of knowledge, it becomes a dense field of interaction where every utterance, gesture, and silence participates in constructing personhood. Languaging is not an accessory to educational activity; it is its very substance. Through it, students and teachers do not merely exchange information but enact relationships, establish hierarchies, and negotiate the boundaries of recognition and belonging. Personhood, in this sense, is not a pre-existing attribute carried into the classroom but an emergent effect of these ongoing interactions. The theoretical grounding of this perspective lies in a humanistic orientation to language, one that privileges memory, experience, and relationality

over formal systems. Languaging draws from prior encounters, reshaping fragments of earlier discourse in response to present circumstances. It is not a process of encoding and decoding fixed meanings but a dynamic alignment of perspectives, where individuals orient themselves toward others and the world. This orientation is not merely cognitive but ethical, involving judgments about how to relate, respond, and recognize the presence of others. Within this framework, personhood becomes a culturally mediated construct, defined not by linguistic competence but by participation in meaningful interaction. To be a person in the classroom is to be recognized as such through acts of languaging that affirm agency, voice, and relational presence. Conversely, the denial or restriction of such acts leads to forms of alienation, where individuals are reduced to functional roles within institutional structures. The classroom thus oscillates between spaces of recognition and spaces of objectification, depending on how languaging unfolds.

The microethnographic analysis of a classroom writing event reveals these dynamics with clarity. A moment of vulnerability, where a student shifts from an academic task to a personal reflection, opens a space for relational engagement. In this moment, languaging moves toward what Martin Buber conceptualized as an I-Thou relation, where individuals encounter each other as whole beings rather than as roles or functions. This mode of interaction is characterized by openness, mutuality, and the suspension of instrumental goals. It is a fragile state, difficult to sustain within institutional settings that prioritize measurable outcomes and standardized forms of performance. The subsequent return to task-oriented discourse illustrates the counterforce of I-It relations, where interaction is redirected toward objectives, evaluations, and the completion of assigned work. Here, languaging becomes instrumental, organizing activity around predefined goals and reducing participants to their roles as students or evaluators. The shift is subtle yet decisive, transforming a moment of shared humanity into a structured exchange governed by academic expectations. This oscillation between I-Thou and I-It is not incidental but constitutive of classroom life, reflecting the tension between relational and institutional demands. The implications of this oscillation extend beyond individual interactions. They shape the broader moral and epistemological climate of the classroom. When I-It relations dominate, personhood is subordinated to performance, and the richness of human experience is narrowed to what can be assessed and measured. Alienation emerges not as an exception but as a structural condition, embedded in the very organization of educational practices. Students learn not only subject matter but also how to inhabit roles that limit their expressive and relational capacities.

Yet the presence of I-Thou moments suggests that alternative forms of engagement remain possible. These moments, though fleeting, reveal the potential for classrooms to become spaces of genuine encounter, where individuals are recognized in their complexity and not merely as bearers of academic output. Such recognition is not achieved through structural reform alone but through the micro-level practices of languaging that either open or close the space for relational engagement. The role of researchers in this process adds another layer of reflexivity. The ways in which classroom events are described, analyzed, and theorized feed back into the practices they seek to understand. Languaging about languaging becomes part of the very phenomenon under study, shaping how educators and policymakers conceptualize classroom life. This reflexive loop underscores the impossibility of a neutral standpoint: every description participates in constructing the reality it describes. What emerges from this analysis is a redefinition of education itself. Learning is no longer confined to the acquisition of knowledge but encompasses the formation of personhood through interaction. The classroom becomes a site where individuals learn how to relate, how to recognize others, and how to position themselves within a social world. Languaging is the medium through which these lessons are enacted, often implicitly, through the patterns of interaction that structure everyday life.

The challenge, then, is not simply to improve communication but to reconsider the ethical foundations of classroom interaction. If personhood is constructed through languaging, then the ways in which we speak, listen, and respond carry profound implications for how individuals come to see themselves and others. Educational practices must therefore attend not only to what is taught but to how interaction unfolds, recognizing that every exchange contributes to the ongoing negotiation of what it means to be human. In this light, the concept of languaging offers more than a theoretical refinement; it provides a lens through which the everyday life of classrooms can be reimagined. It reveals the hidden work through which personhood is constructed and contested, and it invites a reconsideration of the values that underpin educational practice. The classroom is not merely a place where knowledge is transmitted but a space where humanity itself is continuously made and unmade through the fragile, persistent act of speaking together.

Bloome, D. and Beauchemin, F. (2016) Languaging Everyday Life in Classrooms. In: Classroom Discourse and Interaction. London: Routledge.

The Worlds We Speak Into Being: Language Beyond the Illusion of One

In E. Demuro and L. Gurney's Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language, the central intervention is immediate and disruptive: the problem is not simply how we understand language, but what we assume language to be, and this assumption quietly determines the very world in which linguistic inquiry takes place. Drawing on the ontological turn associated with thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the text challenges the long-standing habit of treating language as a singular, stable phenomenon. Instead, it proposes that there are multiple ontologies of language, each producing a different reality, a different configuration of what counts as communication, meaning, and human relation.

The shift from epistemology to ontology marks a decisive reorientation. Rather than asking what we know about language, the inquiry turns to what language is allowed to be within different conceptual frameworks. This is not a purely abstract question. The way language is conceptualized determines the kinds of questions that can be asked, the methods that can be employed, and the conclusions that can be reached. Every theory of language is thus grounded in an implicit ontology, a set of assumptions that shape the field of inquiry before any analysis begins. What appears as neutral investigation is already structured by prior commitments about the nature of language itself. From this perspective, the idea of a single entity called "Language" becomes untenable. What has traditionally been treated as one object reveals itself as a multiplicity of phenomena, each emerging from different practices and conceptualizations. The task is not to refine a unified theory but to recognize the coexistence of multiple ontologies, each with its own internal logic and consequences. Language is no longer a stable object awaiting description; it is a variable construct that changes according to how it is enacted and understood. The first ontology examined is language as an object. This is the dominant framework in much of linguistic thought, where language is conceived as a bounded system composed of discrete units—sounds, words, rules—that can be analyzed and described independently of their use. Within this ontology, language appears as something that exists prior to and apart from human interaction, a structure that speakers internalize and deploy. This view supports the development of standardized grammars, dictionaries, and educational systems, all of which rely on the assumption that language can be stabilized and codified.

Yet this object-oriented ontology carries significant implications. By treating language as a fixed entity, it encourages the belief that there are correct and incorrect forms, legitimate and illegitimate

speakers, standard and non-standard varieties. It also supports hierarchical distinctions between languages, reinforcing social and political inequalities. What appears as a neutral description of linguistic structure becomes a mechanism for organizing social life, determining who can speak, how, and with what authority. In contrast, the second ontology conceptualizes language as practice. Here, the focus shifts from abstract systems to the activities through which meaning is produced. Language is not something that exists independently of use; it is constituted through interaction, emerging in the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments. This perspective aligns with approaches that emphasize languaging, viewing communication as an ongoing process rather than a fixed system. Meaning is not contained within linguistic forms but arises through their deployment in specific contexts. This ontological shift dissolves many of the boundaries that define the object-based view. Languages are no longer discrete entities but fluid repertoires of practices that vary across situations. The emphasis moves from correctness to effectiveness, from structure to interaction, from system to event. Language becomes inseparable from the social and material conditions in which it occurs, embedded in the practices that sustain it.

The third ontology extends this relational perspective further by conceptualizing language as assemblage. Drawing on theoretical currents that emphasize networks and materiality, this view understands language as part of a broader configuration of human and non-human elements. Communication is not confined to human actors or linguistic forms but involves objects, spaces, technologies, and bodies, all of which participate in the production of meaning. Language, in this sense, is not a bounded system or even a purely human practice but a distributed phenomenon that emerges from the interaction of diverse components. Within this assemblage ontology, the distinction between language and world collapses. Language does not simply represent reality; it participates in its formation. The act of speaking, writing, or interacting does not merely describe the world but contributes to bringing it into being. This is the sense in which language is world-making: it does not stand apart from reality but is entangled in the processes through which reality is constituted. The implications of this perspective are far-reaching. If different ontologies of language produce different worlds, then the choice of ontology is not merely a theoretical preference but an ethical and political decision. To adopt one ontology rather than another is to endorse a particular vision of social relations, identity, and power. The object-based ontology may support standardization and control, while the practice-based ontology emphasizes interaction and adaptability, and the assemblage ontology foregrounds complexity and interdependence. Each carries its own consequences for how language is studied, taught, and lived.

The recognition of multiple ontologies also challenges the tendency to treat linguistic diversity as variation within a single system. Instead of seeing different languages or practices as variations of a common underlying structure, this approach suggests that they may belong to fundamentally different ontological frameworks. What counts as language in one context may not align with what counts as language in another. This perspective opens the possibility of engaging with linguistic phenomena on their own terms, rather than forcing them into pre-existing categories. At the same time, the move toward ontology demands a heightened awareness of the assumptions that underlie linguistic inquiry. The questions researchers ask are not neutral; they are shaped by the ontological frameworks within which they operate. To ask what language is, or could be, is to recognize that these frameworks are neither inevitable nor immutable. They can be questioned, reconfigured, and replaced, opening new possibilities for understanding and engagement. Ultimately, the argument returns to the idea of world-making. Language is not a passive medium through which reality is described but an active force in the construction of that reality. Different ontologies of language do not merely offer different perspectives on the same phenomenon; they enact different worlds.

To study language, therefore, is to engage with the processes through which worlds are made, maintained, and transformed.

The consequence of this realization is both unsettling and generative. It unsettles the certainty that language can be captured within a single, unified theory, and it generates new possibilities for thinking about communication, identity, and social life. The question is no longer how to define language once and for all, but how to navigate the plurality of ways in which language can exist, and what kinds of worlds these ways bring into being.

Demuro, E. and Gurney, L. (2020) Languages/Languaging as World-Making: The Ontological Foundations of Language. Deakin University.

The Place Where Words Become Action: Language as Practice in the World

In Alastair Pennycook's Language as a Local Practice, the argument unfolds as a decisive break from the enduring illusion that language exists as a stable system awaiting use, proposing instead that what we call language emerges from situated acts, inseparable from the places, histories, and movements in which people engage, a position aligned with the sociological insights of Pierre Bourdieu. The concept of language is thus relocated from an abstract domain into the immediacy of lived activity, where meaning is not transmitted but enacted, and where speaking, writing, and interacting are forms of doing rather than applications of a pre-existing code.

At first glance, describing language as a local practice may appear to echo familiar sociolinguistic claims that language varies by context. Yet this formulation is not an extension of that view but a challenge to it. The issue is not how a stable language adapts to different contexts, but how what we call language is itself produced through the unfolding of social practices. Language does not precede action; it arises within it. The distinction is subtle but transformative: it shifts the analytical focus from systems to events, from structures to performances, from static entities to ongoing processes. This reorientation is closely tied to a broader movement in the social sciences toward the local and the particular. In response to grand theories that sought universal explanations of human behavior, attention has turned to the specificity of everyday life, to what people actually do in concrete situations. Practices—whether linguistic, social, or cultural—become the fundamental units of analysis, not as isolated acts but as patterned activities shaped by histories and expectations. To speak of language as a practice is therefore to situate it within the fabric of social life, where it is continuously produced and reproduced through interaction. The notion of locality itself undergoes a similar transformation. It cannot be reduced to a fixed geographical point or a simple opposition to the global. Rather, locality is relational, defined through networks of movement, interpretation, and interaction. A place is not merely a backdrop for language use; it is actively constituted through the practices that occur within it. When individuals speak, write, or gesture, they are not only using language but also participating in the ongoing construction of the spaces they inhabit. Language and place are thus mutually constitutive, each shaping and reshaping the other in a continuous process of becoming.

From this perspective, the familiar idea of language in context becomes inadequate. Context is no longer an external frame within which language operates but an integral component of the practice itself. Language does not enter a context; it helps create it. Every act of communication involves an interpretation of the surrounding environment, an orientation toward others, and a positioning within a social field. These interpretations are not fixed but negotiated, and the practices that emerge from them are both constrained by history and open to transformation. This emphasis on practice also foregrounds the temporal dimension of language. Practices are not isolated events

but repetitions with variation, actions that draw on past experiences while responding to present circumstances. Each instance of languaging carries traces of previous interactions, yet it is never identical to them. Repetition becomes the site of difference, where the familiar is reconfigured in response to new conditions. Through this process, language remains both stable enough to be recognizable and flexible enough to accommodate change. The implications of this view extend to the question of linguistic diversity. Rather than counting languages as discrete entities, diversity is understood in terms of the multiplicity of practices through which meaning is produced. This shift moves the focus away from the boundaries between languages and toward the ways in which people draw on a range of semiotic resources to navigate their social worlds. Language becomes one element within a broader assemblage of communicative practices, intertwined with gesture, material objects, and spatial arrangements.

A simple act, such as writing a postcard, illustrates these dynamics. What appears to be a straightforward use of language reveals itself as a complex practice embedded in a network of relationships, memories, and spatial orientations. The act is shaped by the physical location of the writer, the imagined presence of the recipient, and the cultural conventions associated with the genre. Language here is not a neutral medium but a means of connecting places, emotions, and identities. The locality of the practice lies not in the language chosen but in the way the act itself is situated within a particular configuration of space and social relations. This example underscores a broader point: language practices are always embedded in specific perspectives on the world. These perspectives are informed by linguistic ideologies, which link language to notions of community, identity, and belonging. As Kathryn Woolard has argued, such ideologies are not merely about language but about the social and moral orders in which language is embedded. To understand language as a local practice, therefore, requires attention to these underlying beliefs and the ways they shape both perception and action. The move toward locality also complicates the relationship between the local and the global. Rather than viewing them as opposing forces, this perspective emphasizes their interdependence. Global processes are always realized through local practices, and local practices are shaped by global movements. The spread of linguistic forms, the emergence of dominant varieties, and the negotiation of identity all occur within this dynamic interplay. Language as a local practice thus provides a lens through which to examine how global flows are mediated, transformed, and sometimes resisted in specific contexts.

What emerges from this analysis is a redefinition of language itself. No longer a bounded system, it becomes an ongoing activity, a form of social action that is inseparable from the conditions of its enactment. This redefinition challenges the foundations of traditional linguistic theory, which has often sought to abstract language from the contexts in which it is used. By returning language to the domain of practice, it becomes possible to account for its variability, its embeddedness, and its role in shaping social life. The consequence of this shift is both analytical and ethical. Analytically, it demands new methods and frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of situated interaction. Ethically, it calls for a recognition of the ways in which language practices are tied to issues of power, identity, and belonging. To study language as a local practice is to engage with the realities of how people live, interact, and make sense of their worlds, acknowledging that these processes are always situated, always contingent, and always open to change.

Pennycook, A. (2010) Language as a Local Practice. London: Routledge.

The Ground of Speech: When Language Happens in Place

In Alastair Pennycook's Language as a Local Practice, the conclusion consolidates a decisive claim: nothing in language exists outside the local, for even the most global phenomenon is realized only through situated acts that occur somewhere, at some time, among particular people. What is often called the global is therefore not an abstract sphere above locality but a pattern formed by countless local practices unfolding simultaneously across different spaces and histories. The local, in this sense, is not a residual category opposed to the global but the very condition of its existence, grounding every instance of meaning-making in the immediacy of the here and now.

Yet locality cannot be reduced to mere spatial presence. It is shaped by perspectives, by the ideologies through which people interpret their environments, and by the forms of knowledge that emerge within specific social and cultural settings. The local is not synonymous with the small, the static, or the traditional. It is dynamic, mobile, and generative, continually reshaped through practices that both reflect and produce the spaces in which they occur. Acts such as graffiti writing or urban conversation do not simply take place in pre-existing environments; they actively constitute those environments, giving form to the spaces they inhabit. Language, within this framework, is inseparable from these processes. It is not a tool applied within context but an outcome of the activities through which context itself is produced. This perspective aligns with the epistemological stance articulated by David Scott, who emphasizes the contingency of positions, the locality of histories, the constructed nature of subjects, and the entanglement of knowledge with power. Language, when viewed through this lens, cannot be treated as a fixed structure governing usage. Instead, it emerges as a contingent and evolving practice, shaped by the interactions and negotiations of those who engage in it. As Suresh Canagarajah suggests, language is not a predefined system but an emergent phenomenon, continuously brought into being through social activity. What speakers do with language—how they adapt, transform, and repurpose it—takes precedence over any abstract notion of linguistic structure.

Such a reorientation challenges the traditional conception of languages as discrete, bounded entities. Approaches within linguistic anthropology, integrational linguistics, and language ecology converge in questioning the assumption that languages exist as separate systems. Instead, they foreground practice as the primary reality, emphasizing that what we call languages are abstractions derived from the fluid and interconnected activities of speakers. This shift allows for a more nuanced understanding of linguistic diversity, one that moves beyond rigid classifications and attends to the hybrid, overlapping, and dynamic nature of actual language use. The implications of this view become particularly evident when considering how diversity is conceptualized. Conventional linguistic analysis tends to categorize languages according to grammatical systems and lexical inventories, drawing boundaries that suggest stability and separation. However, such categorizations obscure the ways in which language practices traverse and dissolve these boundaries. Diversity is not a matter of counting distinct languages but of recognizing the multiplicity of practices through which meaning is produced. These practices operate across physical, social, and cognitive domains, forming complex assemblages that cannot be adequately captured by static models. The global spread of English offers a revealing example. It is often described as the expansion of a single, unified language, yet this description fails to account for the multiplicity of forms and histories that constitute English in practice. What is called English is not a singular entity but a series of localized enactments, each shaped by specific conditions and trajectories. Its apparent unity is an abstraction imposed upon a heterogeneous reality. To understand English, or any language, requires attention to the diverse practices through which it is continually reconstituted in different settings.

This reconceptualization has profound consequences for applied linguistics. The longstanding division between theory and practice becomes untenable once language itself is understood as practice. Theory can no longer stand apart as an abstract framework to be applied; it must engage directly with the lived realities of language use. This entails a shift toward examining the political, social, and material dimensions of language, recognizing that linguistic practices are always embedded in relations of power and shaped by historical conditions. In the domain of education, this perspective calls for a transformation in how language learning is conceived. Rather than treating languages as discrete systems to be mastered, it becomes necessary to focus on the development of communicative practices that draw on multiple resources. Learning is not the accumulation of separate languages but the cultivation of the ability to navigate complex linguistic environments. This approach aligns with the notion of translingual practice, where individuals mobilize diverse semiotic resources to achieve meaning in context, reflecting the realities of contemporary communication. Such a shift also reconfigures approaches to language policy. Traditional models, particularly in bilingual education, often rely on clear separations between languages, assigning them distinct roles and domains. However, these models fail to capture the fluidity of actual language use, where boundaries are constantly negotiated and redefined. A practice-based perspective advocates for policies that recognize and support this fluidity, enabling more flexible and inclusive forms of linguistic engagement.

Ultimately, to conceive of language as a local practice is to recognize its fundamentally relational and situated nature. Language is not an external system imposed upon social life but an integral part of the processes through which social life is constituted. It is shaped by the contexts in which it occurs and, in turn, shapes those contexts, participating in the ongoing construction of meaning, identity, and space. This understanding opens the way to a more comprehensive account of linguistic diversity, one that acknowledges the complexity of language as lived experience and foregrounds its role in the continuous making of the social world.

Pennycook, A. (2010) Language as a Local Practice. London: Routledge.

The Living Act of Speech: From Language to Languaging

In A. L. Becker's "Language and Languaging," the opening invocation of Raymond Williams establishes a decisive premise: any definition of language is inseparable from a definition of human existence in the world. Language is not a neutral object awaiting description; it is a conceptual lens through which the human condition itself is articulated. From this starting point, Becker turns critically toward the structuralist tradition—from Ferdinand de Saussure to Noam Chomsky—arguing that its foundational assumptions obscure rather than illuminate the lived reality of linguistic activity. Structuralism, in its various forms, has sought to stabilize language as a system: a set of relations linking sounds and meanings through abstract structures governed by rules. Yet in doing so, it detaches language from time, memory, and the world in which it unfolds, reducing a dynamic human practice to a static architecture.

This reduction, Becker suggests, rests on a circular logic. Structuralist theories often posit pre-existing conceptual structures as the input to language, only to reconstruct those same structures as the output of linguistic analysis. The result is a self-referential system in which language appears to explain itself. The notion of an innate, autonomous grammar—supported by arguments such as the poverty of stimulus—further reinforces this circularity. By assuming the existence of a universal grammar within the mind, theory begins with what it claims to discover. Becker's critique echoes the philosophical skepticism of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who warned against

mistaking the analytical tools we create for the realities they are meant to describe. Grammars, in this view, are not hidden structures waiting to be uncovered but artifacts of observation—products of language games that serve practical purposes yet risk being reified into natural facts. Against this backdrop, Becker proposes a fundamental shift: from Language, conceived as an abstract entity, to languaging, understood as an ongoing human activity. Languaging is not the execution of a pre-existing system but the continuous reshaping of remembered utterances in response to new contexts. It is rooted in memory rather than in abstract rules, in the imperfect recollection and adaptation of prior texts rather than in the application of a fixed grammar. Children do not internalize a complete system at once; they gradually build repertoires of expression, learning to recontextualize fragments of past interactions. This process does not culminate in mastery but persists throughout life, as individuals continually adjust their linguistic practices to evolving circumstances.

Such a perspective redefines communication itself. Instead of viewing it as the encoding and decoding of meaning, Becker frames it as an orientational process: a way of positioning oneself and others within a shared world. Meaning does not exist outside of languaging, waiting to be transmitted; it emerges through the interaction. This orientation toward the world is shaped by memory, by the accumulation of prior experiences that inform how utterances are produced and interpreted. As self-awareness develops, individuals undergo shifts in their understanding of both language and reality—what Richard Rorty describes as transformative changes in perspective. Learning a new language, therefore, is not simply acquiring a new system but constructing a new set of memories, a new repertoire of texts through which one can participate in different forms of life. Becker's pedagogical reflections reinforce this argument. In his experience teaching Southeast Asian languages, the traditional emphasis on grammar and vocabulary proves insufficient, even misleading. What matters is not the mastery of abstract structures but the cultivation of memory—the ability to recognize and reproduce patterns of usage within their historical and contextual specificity. Language learning becomes less an exercise in rule application and more a process of attunement to prior utterances, of embedding oneself within a continuum of linguistic practice.

This reconceptualization finds support in the biological and philosophical work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, whose notion of languaging emphasizes interaction over representation. For them, linguistic activity is not a mechanism for transmitting information but a form of coordinated behavior through which organisms orient themselves to one another. Syntax and semantics, often treated as separable domains, dissolve into a unified process that exists only within the cognitive domain of the observer. The observer, far from introducing bias, is a necessary condition for the existence of linguistic phenomena. This insight resonates with earlier pragmatic philosophies, including those of John Dewey, which foreground action and experience over abstraction. The implications of Becker's argument extend beyond theoretical critique. If languaging is the primary reality, then the task of linguistics cannot be confined to mapping structures or relating sounds to meanings. Such tasks presuppose a separation between language and meaning that Becker rejects. Meaning is not external to languaging; it is constituted within it. Linguistic theory, therefore, must account for the processes by which utterances are continually remade in social interaction, rather than seeking stable entities underlying them. This shift challenges the foundational assumptions of much of modern linguistics, calling for an approach that is historical, contextual, and attentive to the lived practices of speakers.

In this light, language appears not as a finished product but as a process perpetually in motion. The insights of José Ortega y Gasset, invoked at the close of Becker's text, underscore this point: the achievement of linguistics lies not in fixing language as an object but in recognizing its ongoing

formation through human activity. Languaging is the medium through which humans engage with the world, shaping and reshaping both their expressions and their understanding. It is not a system to be mastered but a practice to be lived, a continuous act of creation that resists final definition.

Becker, A. L. (1995) 'Language and Languaging', in A. L. Becker (ed.) Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

The Social Pulse of Speech: Children, Change, and the Work of Languaging

In Martha Sif Karrebæk, Lian Malai Madsen, and Janus Spindler Møller's Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children and Youth, the introduction situates contemporary sociolinguistics within a world fundamentally altered by mobility and technological acceleration. The linguistic landscape is no longer stable or easily mapped; it is characterized by constant variation, shifting norms, and the coexistence of multiple, often competing, linguistic resources. These transformations generate not only empirical complexity but also theoretical tension, demanding frameworks capable of accounting for fluidity rather than fixity. The concept of languaging, drawn from the work of Jens Normann Jørgensen, becomes central to this effort, offering a way to move beyond the rigid classification of languages as discrete systems.

Languaging reframes language use as an activity rather than an object, dissolving the boundaries that traditionally separate named languages. Instead of beginning with predefined categories such as "Danish," "Arabic," or "English," this approach foregrounds the practices through which speakers draw on diverse resources in real time. What might appear as hybridity under older models is no longer treated as deviation but as a fundamental condition of communication. This perspective aligns with broader critiques advanced by scholars such as Ofelia García and Li Wei, who emphasize the fluid and integrated nature of linguistic repertoires. In this view, language is not something individuals possess but something they do, continuously assembling and reassembling meaning through interaction. The empirical foundation of the volume lies in collaborative ethnographic research conducted in a Copenhagen school, where a group of researchers examine the everyday linguistic practices of children and youth. This shared project is not merely a collection of case studies but a coordinated effort grounded in a common epistemological orientation. By focusing on a specific social setting, the research captures the immediacy of languaging as it unfolds in daily life, while also tracing connections across time and across individuals. The result is a layered account that links momentary interactions to broader trajectories of socialization, revealing how linguistic practices are both shaped by and constitutive of social experience.

A key insight emerging from this work is that language among young people is not simply reflective of existing social conditions but actively generative of future possibilities. The ways in which children and youth use language—how they mix resources, negotiate norms, and position themselves within social relations—contribute to the ongoing transformation of linguistic practices. This forward-looking dimension challenges static models of language change, suggesting instead that innovation is embedded in everyday interaction. Young speakers are not passive recipients of linguistic norms but active agents in their reconfiguration, participating in the continual evolution of communication. Central to this perspective is the recognition that meaning is constructed locally, within the situated contexts of interaction. Language does not carry fixed meanings that are transmitted unchanged from speaker to listener; rather, meanings are produced and negotiated in the course of social engagement. These processes are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of participants, intertwined with their goals, identities, and relationships. By

examining languaging in its immediate context, the research uncovers the social purposes that linguistic practices serve, from establishing group belonging to contesting authority or redefining norms.

At the same time, the volume seeks to bridge the gap between micro-level interactions and macro-level social processes. Individual moments of languaging are connected to larger patterns of socialization, illustrating how repeated practices accumulate into recognizable trajectories. Through the combination of detailed case studies, the research constructs a broader narrative that captures both the specificity of individual experiences and the generality of sociolinguistic processes. This approach allows for insights that extend beyond the Copenhagen context, contributing to a wider understanding of language in contemporary societies. The theoretical framework underpinning this work is further enriched by the concept of superdiversity, associated with Steven Vertovec, which highlights the unprecedented complexity of modern social formations. Superdiversity draws attention to the multiplicity of variables—migration histories, legal statuses, economic conditions, and cultural affiliations—that shape linguistic practices. In such contexts, traditional models based on stable communities and clearly bounded languages prove inadequate. Languaging, as a concept, responds to this complexity by focusing on the fluid, adaptive, and context-dependent nature of communication.

Methodologically, the research emphasizes ethnographic engagement, combining detailed observation with collaborative analysis. This approach acknowledges that understanding language practices requires immersion in the social environments where they occur, as well as reflexivity about the role of researchers in interpreting these practices. The process of describing and analyzing languaging is itself part of the broader dynamics of meaning-making, influencing how language is understood and valued. In this sense, the research is not merely descriptive but also constitutive, participating in the very phenomena it seeks to explain. Ultimately, the introduction positions languaging as a key to understanding the complexities of language in contemporary life. By shifting attention from static systems to dynamic practices, it opens up new ways of conceptualizing linguistic diversity, social interaction, and cultural change. Language emerges not as a fixed structure but as a living process, embedded in the everyday actions of individuals and communities. Through the study of children and youth, this process is revealed in its most generative form, as a site where new norms are forged and future possibilities are imagined.

Karrebæk, M. S., Madsen, L. M. and Møller, J. S. (2015) Everyday Languaging: Collaborative Research on the Language Use of Children and Youth. Berlin: De Gruyter.

The Dissolution of the Code: From Languaging to Assemblage

In Laura Gurney and Eugenia Demuro's "Tracing New Ground, from Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages," the movement of contemporary linguistic thought is traced across a decisive transformation: from the stability of language as an object, to the fluidity of languaging as practice, and finally toward the radical openness of assemblage. This trajectory does not merely extend previous theories but unsettles their foundations, calling into question the very ontology upon which language has long been understood. What appears at first as a theoretical refinement reveals itself as a deeper reconfiguration of how language exists, how it operates, and how it is entangled with the world.

The starting point of this transformation lies in the critique of language ideologies. Language, far from being a neutral medium, has been historically constructed through political, cultural, and institutional forces that tie it to identities, territories, and hierarchies. These constructions persist

even in critical discourse, shaping how linguistic phenomena are categorized and interpreted. The multilingual turn emerges as a response to this limitation, challenging the assumption that languages exist as discrete, bounded systems. Instead, it foregrounds practices such as translanguaging and metrolingualism, which reveal the permeability of linguistic boundaries and the improvisational nature of communication. Yet even within this shift, remnants of the language-as-object paradigm remain, as the very notion of multilingualism often presupposes the existence of separable languages that are subsequently combined. It is precisely this residual attachment that assemblage theory seeks to overcome. Drawing on the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, assemblage thinking reconceives language not as a system but as an emergent effect of heterogeneous relations. An assemblage is not a unified structure but a constellation of elements—human and non-human, material and discursive, historical and immediate—that come together, interact, and continually reconfigure. Within this framework, language ceases to be a stable entity and becomes a process that arises from the interplay of bodies, technologies, environments, and ideologies. It is not located in the mind or in a system of rules but distributed across networks of interaction that extend beyond the human subject.

This ontological shift has profound implications. To think of language as assemblage is to abandon the search for underlying structures that govern linguistic behavior. Instead, attention turns to the conditions under which linguistic practices emerge, transform, and dissolve. Language is no longer the starting point of analysis but its outcome, a temporary stabilization within a field of ongoing activity. This perspective captures the temporality of language, its constant becoming, as well as its materiality, its dependence on bodies, spaces, and technologies. It also foregrounds complexity, resisting reduction to singular explanations and acknowledging the multiplicity of forces that shape communication. The concept of languaging occupies an intermediate position in this transformation, bridging the move from object to assemblage. By emphasizing language as action, languaging disrupts the static conception of language and highlights its embeddedness in lived experience. However, assemblage thinking pushes this insight further, dissolving even the residual centrality of the human actor. Languaging is no longer solely a human activity but part of a broader network of interactions in which agency is distributed. Meaning is not produced by individuals alone but co-constructed through the interplay of diverse elements, including non-human actants such as technologies, infrastructures, and material conditions.

Such a perspective challenges deeply entrenched ideologies of monolingualism and linguistic purity. If language is an assemblage, then the idea of a pure, bounded language becomes untenable. What appears as a language is merely a provisional configuration within a dynamic field of relations. This insight destabilizes the hierarchies that privilege certain languages or varieties over others, revealing them as effects of power rather than intrinsic qualities. It also opens up new possibilities for understanding linguistic diversity, not as a collection of separate systems but as a spectrum of practices that intersect, overlap, and transform one another. The political implications of this shift are significant. By moving beyond essentialist conceptions of language, assemblage thinking exposes the mechanisms through which language is used to regulate, exclude, and dominate. At the same time, it highlights the potential for resistance and transformation inherent in linguistic practices. If language is not fixed, then it can be reconfigured; if it is not owned, then it can be appropriated; if it is not bounded, then it can exceed the limits imposed upon it. This perspective aligns with broader decolonial and posthumanist efforts to rethink knowledge, agency, and the human itself, situating language within a more expansive and interconnected ontology.

Ultimately, the movement from language to languaging and from languaging to assemblage represents a radical reimagining of linguistic theory. It calls for an approach that is attentive to the

fluidity, complexity, and relationality of language, one that recognizes its entanglement with the material and social world. In this view, language is not a stable object to be described but a process to be traced, a field of activity in which meaning is continually negotiated and transformed. The future of language studies, as Gurney and Demuro suggest, lies in embracing this openness, allowing for new forms of inquiry that engage with the lived realities of communication in all their multiplicity and change.

Gurney, L. and Demuro, E. (2020) 'Tracing New Ground, from Language to Languaging, and from Languaging to Assemblages: Rethinking Languaging through the Multilingual and Ontological Turns', Language Sciences, 81, 101255.

The Gentle Violence of Norms: When Language Rewards Become Control

In Mike Mena's Soft Linguistic Terrorism: 21st Century Re-Articulations, the concept first articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa is revisited and transformed to account for contemporary sociolinguistic realities. Where earlier forms of linguistic terrorism relied on overt punishment—humiliation, exclusion, even physical discipline—to enforce dominant language norms, Mena identifies a subtler mechanism at work today. This new formation, which he terms soft linguistic terrorism, no longer depends primarily on coercion but on consent engineered through incentives. The violence has not disappeared; it has been refined, internalized, and made to appear desirable.

At the center of this analysis lies the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, an institution that presents itself as bilingual while simultaneously promoting a hierarchy of linguistic forms. "Standard Spanish," associated with distant and prestigious locales such as Mexico City or Spain, is positioned as a valuable economic resource, while the Spanish spoken by local Mexican American students is rendered deficient. This distinction is not merely linguistic but deeply racialized, producing a division between legitimate and illegitimate speakers. The ideology of standardization thus functions as a mechanism of differentiation, aligning linguistic value with social and geographic distance from marginalized communities. What distinguishes soft linguistic terrorism from its earlier forms is the shift from punishment to reward. Students are not explicitly penalized for using their home language varieties; instead, they are encouraged to abandon them through promises of upward mobility. Academic success, professional opportunities, and social recognition are tied to adherence to standardized norms. In this way, linguistic conformity becomes a pathway to inclusion, while resistance risks exclusion. The system operates by shaping desires, leading individuals to internalize the very hierarchies that marginalize them. Consent is not freely given but produced through the strategic distribution of rewards.

The multi-generational dimension of this process reveals its depth. Mena's testimonio illustrates how the legacy of overt linguistic repression continues to shape present practices. His mother, having experienced punishment for speaking Spanish, adopted English as a protective strategy within the family. This decision, rooted in survival, nonetheless perpetuated the association between English and success, embedding linguistic hierarchies within intimate spaces. The author himself later reproduced these norms in his role as an educator, demonstrating how linguistic terrorism extends beyond institutional settings into personal and intergenerational dynamics. Despite its transformation, linguistic standardization remains the core mechanism through which these hierarchies are maintained. The notion of "language-elsewhere" captures this dynamic: the idealized form of a language is always located outside the local context, tied to spaces of prestige and power. Local linguistic practices are thereby positioned as incomplete or corrupted versions of a distant norm. This spatialization of linguistic value reinforces broader structures of inequality,

linking language to class, race, and geography. Even within a bilingual institution, the coexistence of languages does not imply equality; rather, it often reproduces asymmetries under the guise of diversity.

The ethnographic interviews conducted in the study reveal how these ideologies are lived and negotiated. Faculty members who advocate for "Mexico City Spanish" as a standard implicitly elevate cosmopolitan and elite forms of speech, while students navigate the tension between their home language and institutional expectations. A bilingual poet's struggle to reconcile his linguistic competence with the perceived inferiority of his home Spanish exemplifies the internal conflict produced by these hierarchies. The issue is not a lack of ability but the devaluation of certain forms of expression, a devaluation that operates through both explicit discourse and implicit norms. Institutional discourse further reinforces these dynamics by framing linguistic improvement as a matter of marketability. Students are encouraged to refine their language skills not for communicative purposes but to align with economic demands. This framing transforms language into a commodity, valued according to its utility in global markets. The emphasis on employability masks the underlying power relations, presenting linguistic standardization as a neutral or beneficial process while obscuring its role in reproducing inequality.

Mena's analysis demonstrates that the shift from hard to soft linguistic terrorism does not represent a reduction in harm but a reconfiguration of its mechanisms. The overt violence of the past has been replaced by a more insidious form of control that operates through desire, aspiration, and self-regulation. This transformation makes resistance more difficult, as the structures of domination are less visible and more deeply internalized. To challenge these dynamics requires not only recognizing the political nature of language but also interrogating the systems that assign value to particular forms of speech. Ultimately, soft linguistic terrorism reveals how language functions as a site of power in contemporary society. It shows that the struggle over language is not merely about communication but about recognition, legitimacy, and belonging. By exposing the subtle ways in which linguistic hierarchies are maintained, Mena calls for a critical engagement with the ideologies that shape language practices, urging educators and institutions to rethink the assumptions that underlie their approaches to language and to confront the inequalities embedded within them.

Mena, M. (2023) 'Soft Linguistic Terrorism: 21st Century Re-Articulations', Education and Linguistics, doi:10.1515/eduling-2023-0003.

The Emergence of Speech in Society: From Structure to Interaction

In John J. Gumperz's introduction to Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication, the study of language is reoriented from an abstract system of forms toward a lived practice embedded in social interaction, marking a decisive shift in how linguistic behavior is understood within human communities. Rather than treating language as an isolated structure, this approach foregrounds communication as a social activity shaped by context, relationships, and historical processes, thereby establishing the foundation for what would become the ethnography of communication.

The historical trajectory outlined reveals that early linguistic inquiry was not initially concerned with speech as a social phenomenon. Enlightenment-era scholarship focused on cataloging linguistic diversity, often motivated by broader projects of understanding human origins or legitimizing national identities. Language was treated as an object to be documented, classified, and traced back to hypothetical ancestral forms. The emphasis on written texts, manuscripts, and

literary traditions reinforced the idea that language existed as a bounded system, separable into discrete units such as languages and dialects, each with a traceable lineage. This orientation aligned linguistic study with the natural sciences, where classification and evolutionary reconstruction dominated intellectual inquiry. Yet even within this early period, a tension emerged between static representation and lived linguistic practice. Some scholars began to turn away from written records and toward the observation of spoken language within communities, recognizing that linguistic change was not merely a historical artifact but an ongoing process shaped by social interaction. The work of dialectologists, who undertook extensive fieldwork to collect speech data, marked a significant step toward empirical engagement with language as it was actually used. Their findings challenged the notion of purely geographic or natural linguistic boundaries, demonstrating instead that political borders, migration, and contact between groups played decisive roles in shaping linguistic variation. Language, in this emerging view, was no longer a passive reflection of history but an active participant in social life.

This shift was further consolidated through the recognition that language is fundamentally a social institution. The idea that patterns of communication within a community influence linguistic diversity introduced a crucial insight: the density and structure of social interaction are central to understanding how language varies and evolves. Rather than being governed solely by internal rules, language is shaped by the networks of relationships through which it is transmitted. This perspective laid the groundwork for later sociolinguistic approaches that would systematically explore the interplay between language and social structure. The development of descriptive linguistics brought a different kind of abstraction, one that sought to resolve the variability of speech by distinguishing between individual utterances and the underlying system they instantiate. By focusing on structural units such as phonemes and morphemes, linguists aimed to identify the patterns that organize linguistic behavior. This approach enabled rigorous analysis but also introduced a degree of separation between language and its social context. The emphasis on structure risked obscuring the variability and situational specificity that characterize actual communication. Nevertheless, it provided essential tools for understanding the systematic nature of language, revealing how seemingly disparate utterances could be understood as manifestations of a shared system.

The emergence of generative grammar intensified this focus on internal structure by positing that linguistic competence is rooted in cognitive mechanisms. Language became a window into the human mind, with deep structures underlying observable speech. While this perspective advanced theoretical understanding, it further distanced linguistic analysis from the social contexts in which language is used. Communication, in this framework, was reduced to the expression of an internal grammar, leaving aside the complexities of interaction, meaning negotiation, and social positioning. It is precisely against this backdrop that the interactional approach gains its significance. By re-centering language within the processes of communication, sociolinguistics reintroduces the social dimension as fundamental rather than peripheral. The study of multilingual communities, in particular, reveals the inadequacy of viewing language as a single, homogeneous system. In many parts of the world, linguistic diversity is the norm, and speakers routinely navigate multiple codes, selecting among them based on context, audience, and purpose. This functional differentiation underscores the adaptability of language and its role as a resource for social action.

Urban sociolinguistic studies further extend this insight by demonstrating that linguistic variation is systematically related to social factors such as class, ethnicity, and identity. Language becomes a means through which social distinctions are both expressed and reproduced. Variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax are not random but carry social meanings that speakers

manipulate in their interactions. This understanding transforms linguistic variation from a problem to be eliminated into a phenomenon to be explained, revealing the intricate connections between language and social life. Central to this perspective is the concept of sociolinguistic variables, which capture the ways in which linguistic forms vary according to social conditions. These variables provide a methodological bridge between linguistic analysis and social theory, allowing researchers to quantify and interpret the relationship between language and social structure. At the same time, they highlight the agency of speakers, who actively use linguistic resources to position themselves within social hierarchies and relationships. The notion of linguistic repertoire further expands this view by emphasizing the range of resources available to speakers. Rather than being confined to a single language or dialect, individuals draw on multiple forms of expression, adapting their speech to different contexts and purposes. This flexibility challenges the idea of linguistic uniformity and underscores the dynamic nature of communication. Language use becomes a process of selection and negotiation, shaped by both individual intentions and social constraints.

Taken together, these developments mark a profound transformation in the study of language. The ethnography of communication does not simply add a social dimension to linguistic analysis; it redefines the object of study itself. Language is no longer seen as an abstract system but as a set of practices embedded in social life, inseparable from the contexts in which it occurs. This perspective opens new avenues for research, focusing on how communication is organized within communities, how meaning is constructed in interaction, and how language both reflects and shapes social relationships. The future directions implied by this approach point toward an increasingly integrative understanding of language, one that bridges the gap between structure and use, cognition and interaction, individual competence and social practice. Fieldwork becomes essential, not as a means of collecting isolated data, but as a way of engaging with the lived realities of communication. By situating language within its social environment, the ethnography of communication offers a framework for understanding the complexity of human interaction, revealing language as both a product and a producer of social life.

Gumperz, J. J. (1972) Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

The Rules Beneath Speech: Language as Social Action

In Dell Hymes's contribution to Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication, language is repositioned from a self-contained system of forms to a socially embedded practice governed by culturally specific norms, revealing that communication cannot be understood without examining the communities and contexts in which it occurs. The central argument challenges the dominance of purely structural approaches to language, insisting instead that linguistic analysis must account for the social conditions that give speech its meaning, function, and value.

At the heart of this reorientation lies the recognition that language is inseparable from social life. Traditional linguistics, with its focus on grammar and structure, abstracts language from the very conditions that make it meaningful. Hymes argues that such abstraction produces an incomplete understanding, as it ignores how speakers actually use language in real situations. Language is not merely a system to be described but a practice to be observed, one that unfolds within specific cultural frameworks. This shift demands a broader perspective, one that integrates linguistic form with social function, thereby establishing sociolinguistics as a distinct and necessary field of

inquiry. The emphasis on ethnographic work marks a decisive methodological transformation. To understand language, one must study it in situ, within the lived experiences of communities. Ethnography allows the researcher to observe how speech is organized, how it varies across contexts, and how it reflects underlying social structures. Rather than treating variation as noise or deviation from a norm, this approach recognizes it as meaningful, revealing the patterned ways in which language is tied to social organization. Through careful observation, it becomes possible to uncover the implicit rules that govern communication within a community. These "rules of speaking" constitute one of Hymes's most significant contributions. They refer to the culturally specific conventions that link particular forms of language to particular settings, participants, and purposes. Speech is never random; it is guided by expectations about what is appropriate, effective, or meaningful in a given context. These rules are not always consciously articulated, yet they are learned and followed by members of a community, shaping how communication unfolds. The same linguistic form may carry different meanings depending on the situation, highlighting the importance of context in interpreting speech.

This insight leads to a fundamental shift in the unit of analysis. Instead of focusing on language as an abstract system or on the individual speaker, Hymes places the speech community at the center of sociolinguistic inquiry. A speech community is defined not simply by shared linguistic forms but by shared norms of use—by a common understanding of how language should be employed in different contexts. This perspective allows for the recognition of communities that may not be linguistically distinct in structural terms but are socially distinct in their communicative practices. The example of Afro-American urban speech communities illustrates this point: their linguistic significance lies not in unique grammatical structures but in the culturally meaningful ways language is used. The distinction between linguistic form and sociolinguistic value further clarifies this approach. Linguistic form refers to the structural aspects of language—its sounds, words, and grammatical patterns. Sociolinguistic value, by contrast, concerns the social meanings attached to these forms, including their associations with status, identity, and social roles. This distinction underscores that language cannot be fully understood by analyzing its structure alone; one must also consider how it functions within social relationships. The same form can carry different values depending on who uses it, in what context, and for what purpose.

Central to this perspective is the concept of situated meaning. Meaning is not inherent in linguistic forms but emerges through their use in specific contexts. A speech act derives its significance from the interaction between linguistic expression and the social conditions in which it occurs. This view challenges the idea that communication is a straightforward transmission of information, emphasizing instead its interpretive and relational nature. Understanding a statement requires not only knowledge of language but also familiarity with the social norms that govern its use. The ethnography of speaking provides a framework for systematically studying these phenomena. It seeks to describe the patterns of communication within a community, identifying the norms, roles, and contexts that shape linguistic behavior. This approach involves not only observing speech but also analyzing the broader cultural practices that give it meaning. It is both descriptive and interpretive, aiming to capture the complexity of communication as it is lived and experienced. Despite its promise, Hymes acknowledges that this field remains in development, requiring further refinement and theoretical elaboration. The challenge lies in creating a comprehensive descriptive framework that can account for the diversity of communicative practices across cultures. Such a framework must include methods for classifying and comparing speech behaviors, while remaining sensitive to the specificities of individual communities. The goal is not to impose rigid categories but to develop tools that can reveal the underlying patterns of language use.

Ultimately, Hymes's contribution reshapes the study of language by foregrounding its social dimensions. Language is no longer viewed as an autonomous system but as a form of social action, deeply embedded in the practices and values of communities. This perspective opens new possibilities for understanding communication, highlighting the ways in which language both reflects and constructs social reality. By integrating linguistic and social analysis, the ethnography of communication offers a more complete and nuanced account of human interaction, one that recognizes the richness and variability of language as it is lived in the world.

Hymes, D. (1972) 'The Ethnography of Speaking', in Gumperz, J. J. (ed.) Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

The Global Cipha: Language, Power, and Identity in Motion

In H. Samy Alim's exploration of global Hip Hop cultures in Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language, language emerges not as a fixed system but as a dynamic, contested practice through which identities are performed, negotiated, and transformed within a transnational cultural space that resists both linguistic purity and political containment. At the center of this analysis stands the concept of the cipha, a space of lyrical exchange that functions simultaneously as performance, dialogue, and intellectual production, revealing how language operates as a living force shaped by movement, competition, and collaboration.

The cipha is more than a site of artistic expression; it is a model for understanding language itself. Within it, speakers draw on multiple linguistic resources, blending dialects, languages, and styles in ways that defy conventional boundaries. This fluidity reflects a broader sociolinguistic reality in which language is not confined to discrete systems but exists as a repertoire of possibilities. The cipha embodies this multiplicity, demonstrating that meaning is produced not through adherence to standardized forms but through creative interaction and improvisation. In this sense, it becomes a microcosm of global linguistic flows, where local and global influences intersect and reshape one another. What distinguishes Hip Hop as a global phenomenon is its capacity to circulate across cultural and linguistic boundaries while remaining rooted in local contexts. The example of multilingual rap performances in cities such as Shanghai illustrates how artists appropriate and transform linguistic resources to articulate their own experiences. These performances are not mere imitations of an original form but acts of reinterpretation that embed global cultural elements within local realities. Language, in this process, becomes a site of negotiation, where global influences are reworked to express specific social and political conditions.

This interplay between global circulation and local adaptation challenges the notion of a monolithic culture. The so-called Global Hip Hop Nation is not a unified entity but a network of interconnected practices, each shaped by distinct histories and ideologies. Language plays a crucial role in this differentiation, as artists use it to signal affiliation, resistance, and innovation. Through practices such as code-switching and language mixing, they navigate complex identities, positioning themselves within both local communities and global movements. These linguistic strategies reveal the extent to which language is intertwined with questions of race, class, gender, and power. Central to this framework is the recognition that language is a political resource. The use of African American English within global Hip Hop, for instance, carries with it a history of struggle and resistance, which is both invoked and transformed in different contexts. As this linguistic form travels, it acquires new meanings, reflecting the specific conditions of the communities that adopt it. This process raises important questions about appropriation,

authenticity, and power, highlighting the uneven dynamics that shape cultural exchange. Language is not simply borrowed; it is recontextualized, and in doing so, it becomes a medium through which broader social tensions are expressed.

The ethnographic studies that inform this work underscore the importance of examining language in its social context. By focusing on specific communities, these studies reveal how linguistic practices are embedded in everyday life, shaped by local ideologies and social structures. They show that Hip Hop is not just a global cultural form but a set of practices that are continually redefined by those who participate in it. This perspective aligns with a broader sociolinguistic approach that views language as a form of social action, inseparable from the contexts in which it is used. For youth in particular, Hip Hop provides a powerful means of self-expression and identity formation. In a world marked by globalization and inequality, it offers a space where marginalized voices can articulate their experiences and challenge dominant narratives. Language, within this space, becomes a tool for constructing alternative identities, enabling individuals to assert their presence in contexts that often exclude them. The creative manipulation of linguistic resources allows for the expression of complex, hybrid identities that reflect the realities of contemporary life. At the same time, the global spread of Hip Hop raises questions about the relationship between language and power. As cultural forms circulate, they are shaped by existing hierarchies, which influence whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized. The politics of language within Hip Hop cannot be separated from these broader dynamics, as they determine the conditions under which linguistic practices gain recognition and legitimacy. This tension between empowerment and constraint is central to understanding the role of language in global cultural flows.

Ultimately, Alim's work calls for a rethinking of language as a dynamic and socially embedded practice. By examining the linguistic dimensions of Hip Hop, it reveals how language operates within complex networks of interaction, shaped by both global forces and local conditions. The cipha, as a conceptual and practical space, exemplifies this complexity, offering a model for understanding how language functions in a world characterized by movement, diversity, and change. It demonstrates that language is not merely a means of communication but a site of creativity, struggle, and transformation, where identities are continually negotiated and reimagined.

Alim, H. S. (2009) 'Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language', in Alim, H. S., Ibrahim, A. and Pennycook, A. (eds.) Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language. New York: Routledge.

The Pedagogy of the Cipha: Desire, Identity, and the Unwritten Curriculum

In Awad Ibrahim's chapter Takin' Hip Hop to a Whole Nother Level: Métissage, Affect, and Pedagogy in a Global Hip Hop Nation, language and education are reimagined through the lens of Hip Hop as a global cultural practice that exceeds institutional boundaries, revealing learning not as a formal transmission of knowledge but as an affective, identity-driven process unfolding within dynamic spaces of cultural blending and expressive agency. The argument moves beyond viewing Hip Hop as mere youth culture and instead positions it as a critical site where language, identity, and pedagogy intersect in ways that challenge dominant educational paradigms.

At the center of this reconceptualization lies the idea of desire—not simply as personal inclination but as a force that draws individuals into cultural affiliation and meaning-making. Hip Hop

becomes desirable because it speaks to lived realities, offering narratives that resonate with experiences of marginalization, struggle, and aspiration. This affective dimension is crucial: learning does not occur in abstraction but through emotional investment. When youth recognize themselves in the language and rhythms of Hip Hop, they engage not only cognitively but existentially, finding in it a means of articulating who they are and who they might become. This process is inseparable from the concept of métissage, which captures the blending and transformation of cultural forms across contexts. Hip Hop's global circulation does not produce uniformity; rather, it generates new, locally inflected expressions that reflect specific social and historical conditions. The interaction between global influences and local practices creates hybrid forms that cannot be reduced to either origin. Language plays a central role in this transformation, as artists draw on multiple linguistic resources to craft expressions that are both globally recognizable and locally meaningful. The emergence of mixed linguistic forms demonstrates that language is not a closed system but an evolving practice shaped by contact and creativity.

The distinction between horizontal and vertical métissage further illuminates the complexity of this process. Horizontal blending suggests a relatively balanced exchange across contexts, while vertical transformation involves deeper engagements with structures of power, where dominant linguistic forms are appropriated and reworked within marginalized communities. In such cases, language becomes a site of negotiation, where global cultural capital is both utilized and contested. The adoption of elements associated with African American linguistic practices, for instance, carries political implications, as these forms are reinterpreted in ways that reflect local struggles and aspirations. Hip Hop's pedagogical significance emerges precisely from this interplay of language, identity, and power. Ibrahim challenges the dismissal of Hip Hop as trivial or disruptive, proposing instead that it constitutes a form of curriculum that operates outside formal educational systems. This "Creative Margin Curriculum" represents what is often excluded from institutional learning, yet it holds profound relevance for students' lives. It engages them in ways that traditional curricula frequently fail to do, connecting knowledge to experience and fostering active participation rather than passive reception.

This perspective exposes a fundamental limitation of conventional education: its tendency to privilege standardized forms of knowledge while ignoring the cultural practices that shape students' identities. By excluding forms like Hip Hop, educational systems reinforce a narrow conception of learning that overlooks the richness of lived experience. Ibrahim's argument calls for a reorientation, one that recognizes the legitimacy of these cultural practices and integrates them into pedagogical frameworks. Such an approach does not merely add new content but transforms the very nature of education, shifting it toward a more inclusive and responsive model. Central to this transformation is the notion of affective pedagogy. Learning is not only about acquiring information but about engaging with material in ways that resonate emotionally and socially. Hip Hop provides a powerful medium for such engagement, enabling students to explore complex issues of race, class, gender, and identity through forms that are meaningful to them. This engagement fosters critical awareness, allowing students to question dominant narratives and articulate alternative perspectives. Language, in this context, becomes a tool for both expression and critique, enabling learners to navigate and challenge the structures that shape their lives.

The global dimension of Hip Hop further expands its pedagogical potential. As a transnational cultural form, it connects individuals across diverse contexts, creating a shared space of interaction and exchange. Yet this space is not homogeneous; it is characterized by multiplicity and difference. Each local manifestation of Hip Hop reflects specific conditions, demonstrating that global culture is always mediated by local realities. This dynamic challenges simplistic notions of cultural

diffusion, emphasizing instead the active role of communities in shaping and redefining cultural forms. Examples from different parts of the world illustrate how Hip Hop functions as a platform for resistance and identity formation. In contexts marked by social inequality, it provides a means of articulating dissent and asserting alternative identities. Language, within these practices, becomes a vehicle for expressing experiences that are often marginalized or silenced in mainstream discourse. The creative manipulation of linguistic resources allows for the construction of identities that are both locally grounded and globally connected, reflecting the complexities of contemporary life.

Ultimately, Ibrahim's work calls for a fundamental rethinking of education and language. It challenges the boundaries that separate formal and informal learning, recognizing that significant educational processes occur outside institutional settings. By embracing the cultural practices of youth, particularly those rooted in Hip Hop, educators can create more meaningful and transformative learning environments. This requires moving beyond rigid curricular structures and acknowledging the value of knowledge produced in the margins. In this vision, language is not merely a subject to be taught but a practice through which individuals engage with the world. It is shaped by desire, transformed through cultural blending, and mobilized as a tool for identity and resistance. Hip Hop, as both a cultural and pedagogical phenomenon, exemplifies this dynamic, offering a model for understanding how language and learning can be reimagined in a globalized world.

Ibrahim, A. (2009) 'Takin' Hip Hop to a Whole Nother Level: Métissage, Affect, and Pedagogy in a Global Hip Hop Nation', in Alim, H. S., Ibrahim, A. and Pennycook, A. (eds.) Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language. New York: Routledge.

The Rhythm of the Global Local: When English Travels and Identity Remixes

In Alastair Pennycook's Hip Hop Be Connectin' from Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows, the scene at the Atmosphere nightclub in Kuala Lumpur becomes a vivid entry point into a broader argument: language, culture, and identity no longer move in simple, one-directional paths from center to periphery, but circulate, collide, and recombine in complex transcultural flows that unsettle traditional assumptions about globalization, English, and power. The performance by Too Phat is not merely entertainment; it is a living demonstration of how global forms are reworked locally, producing something neither purely imported nor entirely indigenous, but fundamentally hybrid.

The language used in the performance immediately disrupts conventional expectations. English appears not as a standardized global medium but as a stylized, rhythmically inflected code shaped by African American linguistic traditions and global hip-hop culture. Expressions such as Hip hop be connectin' carry grammatical and phonological traces of African American English, yet they are embedded in a Malaysian context, referencing local spaces, collaborations, and identities. This is not simply imitation; it is transformation. The language becomes a resource, not a constraint, allowing speakers to position themselves simultaneously within a global cultural network and a local sociocultural reality. Such moments challenge the enduring narrative of cultural imperialism that frames globalization as a unidirectional imposition of Western, particularly American, culture on the rest of the world. At first glance, the presence of hip-hop in Malaysia, with its linguistic and stylistic ties to African American culture, might seem to confirm this narrative. Yet a closer examination reveals a far more complex process. The adoption of hip-hop forms does not erase local culture; instead, it provides a framework through which local identities can be articulated,

negotiated, and reimagined. The references to Kuala Lumpur, local foods, and everyday experiences anchor the performance in a distinctly Malaysian context, even as it participates in a global cultural idiom.

This dual orientation—global and local at once—exposes the inadequacy of binary frameworks that oppose authenticity to imitation, or resistance to domination. The concept of Blinglish encapsulates this tension. On one hand, it may be dismissed as inauthentic mimicry, a superficial adoption of linguistic forms detached from their original social and historical contexts. On the other hand, it can be understood as a creative appropriation, a means by which speakers claim access to a global cultural resource and reshape it according to their own needs and aspirations. The question is not whether such language is authentic, but how it functions within specific social and cultural configurations. The UK courtroom anecdote further complicates the issue of intelligibility. The judge's inability to understand hip-hop expressions despite their being in English reveals that language is not defined solely by shared vocabulary or grammar. Meaning emerges from participation in specific cultural practices. Hip-hop language operates as a subcultural code, intelligible to those who inhabit its world and opaque to those who do not. This underscores a crucial point: language cannot be separated from the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. What appears as linguistic deviation or incomprehensibility from one perspective may be perfectly coherent within another.

The Malaysian example also invites reflection on the relationship between language and material culture. References to brands such as Louis Vuitton or BMW evoke the global circulation of commodities and the symbolic economies associated with them. Yet Too Phat's rejection of the necessity of blingin' signals a critical engagement with these global symbols. Rather than uncritically reproducing the materialism often associated with mainstream hip-hop, they selectively appropriate its elements, aligning themselves with its expressive potential while distancing themselves from certain of its ideological associations. This selective appropriation highlights the agency of local actors in shaping global cultural forms. At the heart of Pennycook's argument is the notion of transcultural appropriation. Unlike models that emphasize either cultural domination or pure hybridity, this concept foregrounds the dynamic processes through which cultural forms are taken up, reworked, and transformed across contexts. English, in this framework, is not a fixed entity spreading across the globe, but a flexible resource that acquires new meanings and functions as it moves. Its role in hip-hop exemplifies this fluidity: it becomes a medium through which diverse identities are expressed, contested, and negotiated.

This perspective also reconfigures the relationship between language and power. While English undoubtedly carries the weight of historical and geopolitical dominance, its use in hip-hop contexts can serve as a form of resistance. By adopting and reshaping English, speakers can challenge dominant norms, articulate alternative identities, and create spaces of cultural autonomy. Hip-hop, with its roots in marginalized communities, carries a legacy of resistance that continues to inform its global manifestations. Yet this resistance is not uniform or unambiguous; it is mediated by local conditions, producing varied and sometimes contradictory outcomes. The educational implications of these dynamics are significant. If language is understood as a dynamic, contextually embedded practice, then traditional approaches to language teaching—focused on standardization and correctness—appear increasingly inadequate. Hip-hop pedagogies, as suggested in the text, offer alternative ways of engaging with language, connecting learning to students' lived experiences and cultural practices. By incorporating forms of expression that resonate with youth, educators can create more inclusive and meaningful learning environments. This approach challenges the

hierarchy that privileges certain forms of language while marginalizing others, opening up possibilities for a more equitable understanding of linguistic competence.

Ultimately, the scene at the Kuala Lumpur nightclub becomes emblematic of a broader transformation in how we understand language and culture in a globalized world. English is no longer simply a tool of communication or a marker of global dominance; it is a site of creativity, negotiation, and struggle. Hip-hop, as a global cultural form, provides a space where these processes become visible, where identities are performed and reconfigured, and where the boundaries between the global and the local are continuously redrawn. Pennycook's analysis invites us to move beyond simplistic narratives of globalization and to recognize the complexity of cultural flows. Language, in this view, is not something that spreads unchanged across the globe, but something that is constantly being remade in the interactions between people, places, and practices. The global does not erase the local; it becomes entangled with it, producing new forms of expression that reflect the diverse realities of a connected yet unequal world.

Pennycook, A. (2007) Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows. London: Routledge.

The Many Lives of English: When Language Becomes Movement

In Alastair Pennycook's Other Englishes from Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows, the scene in Noumea, New Caledonia, becomes a powerful illustration of how language, culture, and identity are not fixed entities but dynamic processes shaped by movement, encounter, and transformation. The performance of capoeira in La Place des Cocotiers is not merely an aesthetic spectacle; it is a convergence of histories—African resistance, Brazilian cultural formation, global hip-hop circulation, and Pacific colonial entanglements—brought together in a single embodied practice. Within this convergence, English appears not as a dominant imposition but as one thread among many, woven into a complex fabric of transcultural exchange.

The setting itself demands attention. New Caledonia is not a neutral backdrop but a historically layered space marked by colonialism, migration, and cultural plurality. The presence of indigenous Kanak communities alongside European settlers, Pacific Islanders, and various migrant groups creates a context in which identity is always negotiated rather than given. In such a space, any cultural practice that arrives—whether capoeira, hip-hop, or English—does not remain intact. It is absorbed into existing tensions and relationships, reshaped by them, and in turn reshapes the environment into which it enters. Capoeira, as presented in this scene, embodies this process of transformation. Originating among enslaved Africans in Brazil as a disguised form of resistance, it carries with it a history of survival, concealment, and defiance. Yet in Noumea, it is no longer solely a Brazilian or Afro-diasporic practice. It has become part of a global repertoire, intersecting with hip-hop culture and circulating through international networks of performance and exchange. The Sydney-based group performing it introduces yet another layer of movement, demonstrating that cultural forms do not travel along simple routes but through multidirectional pathways that complicate any notion of origin or authenticity.

Within this context, the use of English in capoeira instruction becomes particularly significant. The mestre's English does not signal the replacement of one language by another, nor does it simply reflect the global dominance of English. Instead, it reveals the pragmatic and symbolic roles that English plays within transnational interactions. English functions as a mediating resource, enabling communication across linguistic boundaries, yet it is also embedded within a network of other languages, histories, and practices. Its presence is contingent, adaptive, and shaped by the specific conditions of the encounter. This example challenges the persistent

tendency to interpret the global spread of English through a binary lens: either as an instrument of cultural imperialism or as a neutral tool of communication. Both perspectives fail to capture the complexity of what is occurring. English does not arrive in a vacuum, nor does it remain unchanged. It interacts with local languages, practices, and identities, producing new forms that cannot be reduced to their origins. The notion of "global Englishes" seeks to account for this diversity, yet even this framework can fall short when it treats different English varieties as stable, bounded entities tied to national contexts.

The critique of models such as the concentric circles of English highlights this limitation. By categorizing English into inner, outer, and expanding circles, such models impose a static structure on what is in reality a fluid and constantly shifting phenomenon. They assume that English can be neatly mapped onto geopolitical boundaries, ignoring the ways in which language flows across and beyond these boundaries. In the Noumea example, English is not simply an "expanding circle" variety; it is part of a mobile assemblage that includes Brazilian cultural forms, Pacific histories, and global youth cultures. What emerges from this analysis is a different way of understanding language—one that foregrounds movement, interaction, and hybridity. English is not a singular, monolithic entity spreading outward from a center; it is a set of practices that take shape through encounters between people, places, and histories. These practices are always situated, always contingent, and always open to reinterpretation. The idea of "other Englishes" thus points not to a collection of alternative standards, but to the multiplicity of ways in which English is lived and experienced in the world.

This perspective also reconfigures the relationship between language and power. It does not deny that English is associated with global inequalities, nor that it can function as a tool of domination. However, it refuses to see these dynamics as totalizing. In contexts like New Caledonia, English is also a resource for negotiation, a means of participation in global networks, and a tool for creating new forms of expression. Its meanings are not fixed but are continually produced and contested through use. The broader theoretical implications of this argument align with approaches to globalization that emphasize complexity and multiplicity. Rather than viewing globalization as a process driven solely by powerful centers, scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Manuel Castells have highlighted the importance of flows—of people, media, technologies, and ideas—that move in multiple directions and interact in unpredictable ways. English, within this framework, is one such flow, entangled with others and constantly reshaped by them.

The capoeira scene in Noumea thus becomes emblematic of a world in which cultural forms are no longer confined to their places of origin, and where language cannot be understood in isolation from the movements that carry it. It illustrates how global and local are not opposing forces but mutually constitutive processes. The local is always already global, shaped by connections that extend beyond it, while the global is always localized, taking on specific forms in particular contexts. Ultimately, the chapter calls for a shift in how we conceptualize English and its role in the world. Instead of asking whether English is a force of homogenization or a vehicle of diversity, we are invited to examine the specific ways in which it is used, transformed, and contested in different settings. This requires attention to the material, social, and historical conditions that shape language practices, as well as to the agency of those who engage with them. English, in this sense, is not simply a language that people speak; it is something that people do. It is part of the ongoing process through which identities are formed, relationships are negotiated, and worlds are made. To understand "other Englishes" is therefore not to catalogue variations, but to recognize the dynamic, relational, and creative nature of language itself.

Pennycook, A. (2007) Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows. London: Routledge.

The Voice of the Margins: When Popular Culture Refuses Silence

In Alastair Pennycook's Taking the Vernacular Voices of the Popular Seriously from Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows, the argument unfolds as a deliberate challenge to one of the most persistent prejudices in academic and cultural discourse: the dismissal of popular culture as trivial, degraded, or intellectually unworthy. At the center of this critique stands hip-hop—not as a mere genre of music, but as a complex cultural formation whose linguistic, political, and expressive capacities demand serious attention. To take hip-hop seriously is not to romanticize it, but to recognize that within its vernacular voices lie critical insights into the workings of language, power, identity, and globalization.

The resistance to engaging with popular culture, particularly within language education and applied linguistics, is not accidental. It is historically rooted in a hierarchy of cultural value that privileges canonical literature and "high culture" as legitimate objects of study, while relegating popular forms to the margins. This hierarchy reflects deeper ideological commitments: the belief that education should elevate taste, refine sensibility, and distance learners from what is perceived as vulgar or superficial. Within such a framework, the presence of hip-hop or other popular cultural forms in academic discourse is seen as a threat to intellectual seriousness, a concession to mediocrity rather than an expansion of inquiry. Yet this exclusion is itself revealing. It exposes not only a cultural conservatism but also a failure to grasp the ways in which popular culture functions as a central site of meaning-making in contemporary life. The dismissal of hip-hop as misogynistic, violent, or commercially driven is not entirely unfounded; these elements are undeniably present. However, to reduce the entirety of hip-hop to these characteristics is to overlook its heterogeneity and its capacity to articulate complex social realities. Such reductive critiques mirror earlier condemnations of other cultural forms—jazz, rock, even the novel—that were once deemed morally suspect or intellectually inferior.

The convergence of conservative and critical perspectives in their skepticism toward popular culture is particularly striking. On one side, conservative critiques lament the decline of cultural standards, viewing mass culture as a distraction from the pursuit of higher values. On the other, Marxist-influenced analyses interpret popular culture as an ideological apparatus, a mechanism through which dominant classes reproduce their power by shaping the desires and consciousness of the masses. In both cases, popular culture is positioned as something to be resisted or transcended, rather than understood on its own terms. What these perspectives fail to acknowledge is the active role of audiences and participants in shaping popular culture. Cultural studies, particularly the work associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, offers a crucial corrective to this view. Rather than treating popular culture as a one-way imposition, it emphasizes the ways in which it becomes a site of negotiation, contestation, and resistance. Popular culture is not merely consumed; it is appropriated, reinterpreted, and transformed by those who engage with it. It is within this process that identities are forged, solidarities are formed, and alternative visions of the social world are articulated.

Hip-hop exemplifies this dynamic with particular clarity. Emerging from the marginalized communities of the United States, it has always been more than entertainment. It is a mode of storytelling, a form of critique, and a means of asserting presence in a world that often renders certain voices invisible. Its linguistic practices—rhythmic innovation, metaphorical density, code-switching—are not incidental but central to its expressive power. Through language, hip-hop artists articulate experiences of racism, poverty, exclusion, and resistance, transforming personal narratives into collective statements. The commercialization of hip-hop complicates this picture

but does not invalidate it. The genre's incorporation into global markets has introduced new pressures, often privileging certain themes—violence, materialism, hypermasculinity—over others. Yet even within these constraints, hip-hop continues to produce spaces of critique and creativity. Its diversity resists any singular characterization. Alongside commercially dominant forms exist alternative currents—political rap, conscious rap, experimental styles—that challenge dominant narratives and expand the possibilities of the genre.

The global spread of hip-hop further underscores its significance. As it travels beyond its original context, it does not remain unchanged. Instead, it is recontextualized within local settings, acquiring new meanings and functions. In Malaysia, France, Germany, Japan, and countless other places, hip-hop becomes a medium through which local issues are expressed—urban marginalization, political repression, cultural identity. This process of indigenization demonstrates that hip-hop is not simply exported culture but a flexible framework that enables diverse forms of expression. Language plays a crucial role in this process. The mixing of languages, dialects, and styles within hip-hop reflects the complex identities of its practitioners. It challenges the notion of linguistic purity, foregrounding instead the fluidity and hybridity of language in a globalized world. Through these linguistic practices, artists negotiate their positions within both local and global contexts, asserting identities that are at once rooted and mobile.

To take hip-hop seriously, then, is to recognize it as a site where language, culture, and power intersect in ways that are both revealing and transformative. It is to listen to voices that are often marginalized or dismissed, and to understand the conditions under which they speak. This requires moving beyond simplistic judgments—whether celebratory or condemnatory—and engaging with the complexities of popular culture as a lived reality. Such an engagement has important implications for education and scholarship. It calls for a rethinking of what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose voices are deemed worthy of attention. By incorporating popular culture into academic inquiry, we do not lower standards; we expand the scope of what can be known and understood. We acknowledge that the experiences and expressions of everyday life are as significant as those enshrined in canonical texts. Ultimately, the vernacular voices of hip-hop remind us that language is not confined to formal settings or elite practices. It is a living, evolving medium through which people make sense of their world, articulate their identities, and contest the structures that shape their lives. To ignore these voices is to miss a crucial dimension of contemporary culture. To take them seriously is to open ourselves to a richer, more inclusive understanding of language and society.

Pennycook, A. (2007) Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows. London: Routledge.

The Discipline That Refuses Comfort: Language, Power, and the Work of Radical Hope

In Alastair Pennycook's Critical Applied Linguistics, framed by the call of Boaventura de Sousa Santos to change the world while reinterpreting it and the enduring maxim of Antonio Gramsci that combines intellectual pessimism with political will, the project of critical applied linguistics is reasserted not as a stable field but as an ongoing intervention in a world marked by instability, inequality, and ideological struggle. The passage makes clear that critical work cannot remain static; it must evolve in response to shifting historical conditions, while also reflecting critically on its own assumptions, limitations, and trajectories.

The need for renewal is not merely temporal but structural. The questions posed about whether critical concerns persist, whether they are bound to their historical moment, and whether they risk

dilution over time are not external critiques but internal challenges. They force the discipline to confront its own possibility of stagnation. Critical applied linguistics, if it is to remain critical, must resist the comfort of its own established frameworks. It must continually re-examine the conditions under which it operates, asking not only what has changed in the world but also how its own modes of analysis might reproduce the very structures it seeks to challenge. The transformation of the sociopolitical landscape over recent decades underscores this necessity. The emergence of climate crisis, the intensification of neoliberal governance, and the proliferation of new communication technologies have reconfigured the terrain on which language operates. These are not peripheral developments but central conditions that shape how language circulates, how knowledge is produced, and how power is exercised. At the same time, enduring structures such as racism and inequality persist with remarkable resilience, demonstrating that historical continuity and transformation coexist rather than replace one another. The task, then, is not to abandon earlier concerns but to rethink them within new configurations of power.

Equally significant is the evolution of the field itself. The emergence of decolonial, posthumanist, antiracist, and new materialist perspectives reflects a broader shift within the humanities and social sciences. These approaches challenge earlier assumptions about the nature of language, knowledge, and subjectivity, expanding the scope of critical inquiry. Yet their incorporation into applied linguistics is not straightforward. Each new framework must be interrogated for its political implications, its epistemological assumptions, and its capacity to engage with real-world inequalities. Critical applied linguistics is thus positioned not as a repository of theories but as a space of ongoing negotiation between competing perspectives. The reflection on the earlier edition of the work introduces a further layer of critique: the recognition that critical discourse itself can become dense, rigid, or inaccessible. The move toward clarity and nuance is not a retreat from complexity but an acknowledgment that critical work must be communicable if it is to have impact. This shift also signals a broader commitment to plurality, resisting the temptation to reduce diverse critical perspectives to simplified categories. The aim is not to resolve tensions within the field but to inhabit them productively.

At the heart of the text lies the concept of radical hope, drawn from the work of Jonathan Lear. Radical hope does not rest on a clear vision of the future; rather, it emerges in conditions where existing frameworks of meaning have been disrupted. It is a form of orientation toward the possibility of transformation, even when the contours of that transformation cannot yet be fully imagined. In the context of global inequality, environmental crisis, and social injustice, radical hope becomes both a necessity and a challenge. It demands action without certainty, commitment without guarantee. The empirical realities invoked—declining yet still alarming child mortality, persistent gender inequality, and widening economic disparities—reinforce the urgency of this stance. Progress, where it exists, is uneven and incomplete. It coexists with new forms of precarity, particularly in the context of displacement and labor insecurity. The rise of a global precariat reflects the structural consequences of neoliberal economic arrangements, where stability is replaced by uncertainty and security by vulnerability. Language, within this context, becomes both a resource and a barrier, shaping access to opportunities while also reinforcing hierarchies.

The discussion of displacement highlights another dimension of contemporary crisis. The movement of millions of people across borders, driven by conflict, environmental degradation, and economic instability, has generated new forms of linguistic and cultural negotiation. At the same time, the rise of xenophobic populism reveals the persistence of exclusionary ideologies that seek to reassert boundaries in the face of mobility. Language is central to these processes, functioning as a marker of belonging, a tool of exclusion, and a medium through which narratives

of identity and difference are constructed. The emergence of digital activism, exemplified by movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, introduces yet another layer of complexity. These movements demonstrate the capacity of language to mobilize collective action, to name injustice, and to challenge dominant narratives. At the same time, they expose the limitations of existing disciplinary frameworks, including applied linguistics, which must confront its own complicity in reproducing racial and epistemological hierarchies. The critique of "white applied linguistics" is not merely a disciplinary concern but a call to rethink the foundations of knowledge production, questioning whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized.

The discussion of post-truth politics and conspiracy theories further complicates the role of language. The manipulation of discourse to produce political effects challenges traditional assumptions about truth, meaning, and communication. In this context, critical applied linguistics must move beyond simple models of misinformation to examine how language functions as a tool of power, shaping perceptions of reality itself. The problem is not only that false statements circulate, but that the conditions under which truth is recognized have been destabilized. The various "turns" within the field—material, racial, queer, translingual, and decolonial—represent attempts to address these challenges by expanding the scope of analysis. Each turn brings new insights, foregrounding aspects of language and society that were previously overlooked. The material turn emphasizes the role of bodies, objects, and environments; the racial and queer turns highlight the intersection of language with identity and power; the translingual turn challenges the boundaries between languages; and the decolonial turn questions the dominance of Western epistemologies. Yet these developments also raise questions about coherence and direction. The proliferation of perspectives risks fragmentation, making it all the more important to maintain a critical orientation that connects theoretical innovation to political engagement.

Ultimately, the revised work positions critical applied linguistics as a discipline that must remain unsettled. It cannot afford to become a fixed set of doctrines or a closed intellectual community. Its strength lies in its capacity to adapt, to critique itself, and to engage with the complexities of a changing world. This requires a balance between skepticism and commitment, between analysis and action. To practice critical applied linguistics is therefore to inhabit a space of tension: between pessimism about existing conditions and optimism about the possibility of change; between the recognition of structural constraints and the assertion of human agency; between the need for theoretical rigor and the imperative of practical relevance. It is a discipline that refuses comfort, insisting instead on the difficult work of confronting injustice while imagining alternatives. In this sense, it is not merely an academic endeavor but a form of engagement with the world, grounded in the belief that language is inseparable from the struggles that define our collective existence.

Pennycook, A. (2021) Critical Applied Linguistics. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

The Governance of Words: Language as Policy, Power, and Decolonial Struggle

In Alastair Pennycook's Critical Applied Linguistics, particularly the chapter on the politics of language, the analysis begins from a premise already established through the works of John E. Joseph and Patrick van Splunder: language is not merely political in essence but is actively constituted through political processes that shape its use, distribution, and value. The focus, therefore, shifts from the abstract claim that language is political to the more concrete question of how this politicality is enacted through institutions, policies, and everyday practices. This shift marks a decisive move from theoretical assertion to analytical engagement, grounding critical applied linguistics in the material conditions under which languages live or decline.

The framework outlined in the chapter situates the politics of language within broader debates about knowledge and power. The earlier identification of multiple approaches—from liberal egalitarianism to neo-Marxist critique and situated practice—reveals that no single perspective can fully account for the complexities of language in the world. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather, they form overlapping constellations that reflect different historical and ideological commitments. This multiplicity is crucial, for it resists the temptation to reduce language politics to a single explanatory model and instead opens space for a more nuanced understanding of how power operates across contexts. The global spread of English serves as a central case through which these dynamics are explored. English is not treated as an isolated linguistic phenomenon but as a lens through which broader questions of globalization, inequality, and cultural exchange can be examined. The liberal egalitarian perspective, which celebrates the coexistence of English with other languages, presents an appealing vision of linguistic harmony. Figures such as David Crystal have argued for a complementary relationship between English as a global lingua franca and the maintenance of local languages. Yet this vision, while optimistic, tends to obscure the structural conditions that shape language use. It assumes that languages can coexist without conflict, ignoring the economic and political forces that privilege some languages over others.

The critique of this perspective reveals its underlying limitations. By framing languages primarily as markers of identity, it reduces them to symbolic resources detached from the material realities of power. The promotion of English as a neutral medium of communication overlooks its entanglement with global inequalities, particularly those rooted in colonial histories and contemporary economic systems. The so-called “colonial celebratory” position, which elevates English as inherently superior, is not merely an outdated ideology but a persistent undercurrent in both public discourse and academic practice. Its challenge requires not only critique but a rethinking of the assumptions that sustain it. In contrast, the concept of linguistic imperialism, developed by Robert Phillipson, foregrounds the structural forces that support the dominance of English. This approach situates language within a broader political economy, highlighting the role of institutions, policies, and global networks in promoting English at the expense of other languages. It exposes the ways in which language teaching, cultural exchange programs, and international organizations contribute to the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies. However, its emphasis on structural dominance risks overlooking the agency of speakers, who do not simply receive English passively but actively reshape it in their own contexts. The language ecology perspective attempts to address this limitation by emphasizing the importance of linguistic diversity. Drawing on ecological metaphors, it frames languages as elements within a system that requires balance and protection. While this approach offers a valuable corrective to homogenizing tendencies, it introduces its own set of problems. By treating languages as objects of conservation, it risks depoliticizing the conditions that lead to their marginalization. The analogy with biological ecosystems can obscure the social and historical processes that shape language use, reducing complex cultural practices to entities in need of preservation rather than transformation.

The discourse of language rights represents another attempt to address inequality. Advocated by scholars such as Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, this perspective frames linguistic diversity as a matter of human rights, arguing that individuals should have the ability to use their languages freely in all domains of life. While morally compelling, this approach often struggles to engage with the economic and political structures that limit such rights in practice. The assertion of rights does not automatically translate into their realization, particularly in contexts where access to resources is unevenly distributed. It is within this tension between structural critique and local practice that the concept of situated language politics emerges as particularly significant. Rather than relying on

grand narratives, this approach focuses on the specific contexts in which language is used and contested. Scholars such as Suresh Canagarajah have emphasized the importance of examining how English and other languages are negotiated in everyday life, particularly in peripheral settings. This perspective highlights the ways in which global forces intersect with local practices, producing outcomes that cannot be predicted solely from structural analysis. The examples of countries such as Iran, South Korea, and the Philippines illustrate these complexities. In each case, English is associated with modernity, economic opportunity, and global participation, yet it also creates new forms of exclusion. Access to English education often reflects broader social inequalities, reinforcing divisions between those who can participate in global networks and those who cannot. The politics of language, therefore, cannot be understood without considering the ways in which language intersects with class, education, and economic power.

The decolonial perspective provides a further layer of analysis by challenging the epistemological foundations of linguistic thought. Drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano, it distinguishes between colonialism as a historical process and coloniality as an ongoing structure of power. This distinction is crucial, for it reveals that the end of formal colonial rule does not mark the end of colonial influence. Instead, colonial patterns of knowledge, language, and authority continue to shape contemporary practices. In applied linguistics, the decolonial turn calls for a re-evaluation of dominant norms, including the privileging of native speakers and standardized forms of language. It challenges the assumption that linguistic authority resides in particular geographical or cultural centers, advocating instead for approaches that reflect the realities of diverse communities. The work of B. Kumaravadivelu on decolonizing TESOL and Ofelia García on translanguaging exemplifies this shift, emphasizing the importance of context, hybridity, and flexibility in language practices. The notion of translanguaging, in particular, disrupts traditional boundaries between languages, presenting communication as a dynamic process that draws on multiple linguistic resources. This approach aligns with the broader decolonial project by rejecting rigid hierarchies and recognizing the legitimacy of diverse forms of expression. It moves beyond the idea of languages as separate systems, instead foregrounding the fluidity of linguistic practice in real-world contexts.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that any meaningful engagement with the politics of language must confront the structures that produce inequality while also attending to the ways in which individuals and communities navigate these structures. This dual focus—on power and practice—defines the critical orientation of the field. It refuses both the optimism of liberal egalitarianism and the determinism of structural critique, seeking instead to understand how language operates as a site of struggle, negotiation, and possibility. The decolonial imperative encapsulates this orientation. It is not simply a call to critique existing systems but an invitation to imagine alternatives, to develop new ways of thinking about language that are grounded in the experiences of marginalized communities. In this sense, the politics of language is not only about identifying problems but also about opening pathways for change.

Pennycook, A. (2021) Critical Applied Linguistics. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

The Architecture of Meaning: Text, Power, and the Illusion of Neutral Language

In Alastair Pennycook's Critical Applied Linguistics, the chapter on the politics of text confronts the dominance of Critical Discourse Analysis by examining how texts become sites where power is both concealed and enacted, drawing on the theoretical traditions shaped by Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak while placing them under sustained critical scrutiny. The chapter marks a shift

from the external organization of language in society to the internal mechanics of textual meaning, asking not simply how language circulates but how it signifies, persuades, and naturalizes particular versions of reality. In doing so, it reframes text as neither passive nor transparent, but as an active terrain where ideological struggles are embedded within seemingly ordinary forms of expression.

Critical Discourse Analysis has achieved a level of institutional prominence that few other approaches in applied linguistics can claim. Its methodological appeal lies in its promise to reveal hidden power structures within language, offering tools to dissect how discourse reproduces inequality. Yet this prominence also invites a critical interrogation of its assumptions. At the heart of CDA lies a commitment to exposing ideology, often conceived as a distortion imposed by dominant groups. This commitment is grounded in a tradition that views language as a medium through which power disguises itself as common sense. The task of analysis, therefore, becomes one of unveiling, of making visible what has been rendered invisible through habitual use. However, this model of critique carries with it a set of epistemological assumptions that are not without tension. If ideology is understood as false consciousness, then the analyst occupies a privileged position outside ideology, capable of discerning truth from distortion. This raises a fundamental question: can any discourse, including critical discourse, claim such neutrality? The problem is not merely methodological but philosophical, touching on the very possibility of objective critique. The risk is that the act of exposing ideology may reproduce the same hierarchies it seeks to dismantle, substituting one authoritative voice for another.

This tension becomes more apparent when the relationship between discourse and ideology is examined more closely. The distinction between language use and systems of meaning—articulated in different ways by scholars such as James Paul Gee—reveals that discourse operates on multiple levels simultaneously. On one level, it consists of the observable patterns of language in use; on another, it embodies broader frameworks through which the world is interpreted. These frameworks are not external to language but are constituted through it, suggesting that meaning cannot be separated from the conditions of its production. The work of Michel Foucault fundamentally disrupts the assumption that ideology is simply a distortion of truth. For Foucault, power is not merely repressive but productive, generating the very conditions under which truth can be articulated. Discourse does not reflect reality; it participates in its construction. From this perspective, the task of analysis shifts from exposing falsehoods to examining how regimes of truth are established and maintained. The implication is profound: critique must account not only for what is said but for the conditions that make certain statements possible while excluding others. This reconceptualization of power complicates the ambitions of Critical Discourse Analysis. If power is diffuse and omnipresent, rather than concentrated in identifiable institutions, then the notion of uncovering hidden ideologies becomes less straightforward. Power is no longer something that can simply be revealed; it must be traced through the intricate networks of discourse that constitute social life. This requires a more reflexive approach, one that acknowledges the analyst's own position within these networks.

The chapter's engagement with critical literacy extends this debate into the realm of education. Here, the politics of text becomes a question of pedagogy: how should individuals be equipped to engage with discourse critically? One approach emphasizes access to dominant forms of language, arguing that mastery of these forms is necessary for participation in societal structures. This perspective, associated with Lisa Delpit, highlights the practical necessity of acquiring the linguistic resources valued by institutions of power. Without such access, marginalized individuals remain excluded from key domains of social and economic life. Yet this approach risks reinforcing

the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. By prioritizing dominant forms of language, it implicitly validates the norms established by those in power, potentially marginalizing alternative forms of expression. The emphasis on access may thus become a form of assimilation, where the goal is not to transform the system but to navigate it more effectively. In contrast, the pedagogical philosophy of Paulo Freire offers a more transformative vision. For Freire, literacy is not merely a technical skill but a process of critical consciousness, enabling individuals to understand and challenge the conditions of their existence. This approach centers on the experiences of learners, recognizing that knowledge is not transmitted but co-constructed through dialogue. Language, in this framework, becomes a tool for emancipation rather than a mechanism of control.

However, this model also encounters practical limitations. While it foregrounds empowerment, it may underestimate the structural constraints that shape educational outcomes. Critical awareness alone does not guarantee access to resources or opportunities, and the challenge remains of translating critical insight into material change. The tension between access and empowerment thus reflects a broader dilemma within critical pedagogy: how to balance the need for immediate participation in existing systems with the aspiration for long-term transformation. The chapter ultimately suggests that these competing approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive but as complementary perspectives that must be held in productive tension. The politics of text cannot be reduced to a single strategy or framework; it requires a multifaceted approach that considers both the structural and the experiential dimensions of language. This involves not only analyzing texts but also understanding the contexts in which they are produced and interpreted. Such an approach calls for a synthesis of methods, combining textual analysis with ethnographic and sociological inquiry. Texts do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within social practices that shape their meaning and impact. To understand the politics of text, it is necessary to examine how discourse operates in real-world contexts, where power is negotiated, contested, and sometimes resisted.

In this sense, the politics of text is not a static field of analysis but an ongoing process of engagement. It requires a willingness to question not only the texts under scrutiny but also the frameworks used to interpret them. Critical applied linguistics, as envisioned in this chapter, is thus characterized by its reflexivity, its openness to revision, and its commitment to examining the complex interplay between language, power, and knowledge. The conclusion that emerges is not one of resolution but of continued inquiry. The politics of text resists closure, demanding instead a sustained engagement with the shifting dynamics of discourse. Power is neither fully hidden nor fully visible; it operates through the very mechanisms that make meaning possible. To study text, therefore, is to enter into a field of uncertainty, where understanding is always provisional and critique remains an unfinished task.

Pennycook, A. (2021) Critical Applied Linguistics. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Conclusion: The Persistence of Form: Language Between Drift, Memory, and Renewal

I. The Weight of Use: Frequency, Memory, and the Shape of Grammar

If language appears stable, it is only because its movements are distributed across time, dispersed across speakers, and embedded in the countless repetitions that constitute everyday use. What emerges from the accumulated evidence is not a system governed by immutable rules, but a field

of tendencies shaped by frequency, similarity, and the gradual strengthening or weakening of patterns. The explanatory force of a usage-based perspective lies precisely in its capacity to account for both the persistence of structure and the inevitability of change without invoking abrupt ruptures or hidden transformations. Frequency operates as a central organizing principle. Each use of a word, a construction, or a phrase reinforces its representation, increasing its accessibility and its resistance to alteration. High-frequency forms become entrenched, not because they are structurally privileged, but because they are repeatedly activated. Their strength lies in memory, not in abstract necessity. This explains why irregular forms often persist in the most common items, while less frequent items are more easily regularized. The conserving effect of frequency stabilizes certain regions of the system even as others remain open to reconfiguration.

At the same time, frequency also drives innovation. Repeated co-occurrence of elements leads to chunking, and chunking produces new units that function as single entities in processing. These units undergo phonetic reduction, semantic generalization, and increasing autonomy from their original components. What begins as a sequence becomes a construction; what begins as a lexical item becomes a grammatical marker. The same mechanism that preserves forms through repetition also transforms them through habituation and extension. Language thus evolves not despite repetition, but because of it. The gradient nature of grammaticality follows directly from this dynamic. Acceptability is not a binary property but a reflection of familiarity and similarity. Constructions that are frequent or resemble frequent patterns are judged as more acceptable, while those that lack such grounding are perceived as marginal or unacceptable. This continuum extends across languages as well as within them. Patterns that are rare in one language may be entirely absent in another, not because they are structurally impossible, but because they fail to achieve sufficient frequency to become conventionalized.

Cross-linguistic similarities, in this light, are not the product of fixed universals but of shared tendencies in usage shaped by common cognitive processes. The recurrence of certain grammaticalization paths across unrelated languages points to the operation of domain-general mechanisms such as categorization, chunking, and inference. These mechanisms interact with the communicative needs of speakers, producing patterns that are similar in outline but variable in detail. The resulting structures are emergent, dynamic, and contingent on the histories of their use. This perspective also clarifies the relationship between synchrony and diachrony. The patterns observed at any given moment are the outcome of prior changes and the starting point for future ones. Synchrony is not a static snapshot but a phase within an ongoing process. To understand the properties of a construction, one must consider the trajectory that produced it. Diachrony thus becomes indispensable for explanation, revealing the sources of apparently arbitrary features and the forces that maintain or alter them.

II. Change Without Rupture: Gradience, Competition, and the Continuum of Structure

The traditional notion of reanalysis as an abrupt, covert change in grammatical structure becomes difficult to sustain in the face of evidence for gradual, usage-driven evolution. The emergence of new categories and constructions does not require discontinuity between generations, nor does it depend on the positing of hidden shifts in underlying representations. Instead, it can be understood as the cumulative effect of small adjustments in usage patterns, reinforced over time through

repetition and analogy. The development of grammatical categories illustrates this gradualism. What appears as a discrete class, such as auxiliary verbs, is in fact the result of multiple overlapping processes of grammaticalization, each with its own trajectory and rate of change. The defining properties of the category—its syntactic behavior, its distribution, its morphological constraints—emerge through the interaction of these processes rather than through a single moment of redefinition. The category solidifies not by decree but by the increasing frequency and consistency of the constructions in which its members participate.

Competition among constructions plays a central role in this process. Older and newer patterns coexist, each with its own domain of application, and their relative frequencies shift over time. The spread of a more productive construction often resembles analogical leveling, as it replaces less frequent or less accessible alternatives. Yet the older constructions are not immediately eliminated; they persist in high-frequency contexts, conventionalized expressions, or specific semantic niches. The result is a layered system in which multiple patterns overlap, each reflecting a different stage of development. This coexistence challenges the idea that grammar consists of uniform rules applied across the board. Instead, it suggests a network of constructions with varying degrees of generality, productivity, and entrenchment. Some constructions are highly schematic and widely applicable, while others are specific and restricted. The boundaries between them are fluid, allowing for gradience and variation. This flexibility enables the system to adapt to changing conditions without requiring wholesale restructuring.

The role of analogy in maintaining and extending this network is crucial. Analogical processes allow speakers to generate new utterances by drawing on existing patterns, ensuring continuity within the system. These processes are sensitive to similarity, frequency, and contextual relevance, producing probabilistic outcomes rather than deterministic ones. The same construction may be extended in different ways depending on the particular exemplars available to the speaker and the specific demands of the communicative situation. The gradual nature of change also has implications for the source of linguistic innovation. The evidence does not support the view that change originates primarily in child language acquisition. While children play a role in reproducing and sometimes extending patterns, their productions largely reflect the variation present in the input. Change is distributed across all speakers and all stages of life, occurring as a by-product of usage rather than as a discrete event in transmission. Adults, through repeated use and adaptation of constructions, contribute to the shifting probabilities that drive change.

This continuity across generations undermines the notion of language as a system that is periodically reset or restructured. Instead, it points to a model in which change is constant, incremental, and embedded in the practices of speakers. The apparent stability of grammar is thus a product of ongoing adjustment rather than the absence of change. The system persists because it is continuously being reconstituted through use.

III. Emergence and Constraint: Language as a Complex Adaptive System

When viewed as a complex adaptive system, language reveals a pattern of organization that is both structured and flexible, constrained and open-ended. The structures that characterize a language—its constructions, categories, and patterns—are not imposed from outside but emerge from the

interaction of cognitive processes, communicative needs, and cultural practices. These structures are shaped by repetition, reinforced by frequency, and modified through analogy and inference. They are neither fixed nor arbitrary, but the result of ongoing adaptation. The concept of grammaticalization provides a clear illustration of this emergent process. Lexical items become grammatical markers through repeated use in specific contexts, undergoing changes in form and meaning that reflect their increasing integration into the system. These changes are driven by general mechanisms such as chunking, reduction, and semantic generalization, which operate across languages and across time. The recurrence of similar grammaticalization paths in unrelated languages suggests that these mechanisms function as attractors, guiding the evolution of structures in predictable directions without determining their exact outcomes.

At the same time, the system is shaped by constraints arising from processing, discourse organization, and cultural practices. Speakers tend to prefer constructions that are easier to process, more effective in communication, or more aligned with conventional ways of organizing information. These preferences influence the frequency of constructions, which in turn affects their conventionalization and grammatical status. The interplay between usage and processing thus creates a feedback loop in which certain patterns become dominant while others remain marginal. Discourse functions play a particularly important role in determining which constructions are maintained and which are lost. The ways in which speakers introduce, track, and relate referents in discourse influence the distribution of grammatical forms. Constructions that align with common discourse strategies become frequent and entrenched, while those that do not are less likely to be used and may eventually disappear. This connection between discourse and grammar underscores the importance of considering language as a tool for communication rather than as an abstract system.
Cultural factors further modulate these processes. The topics that speakers choose to discuss, the social contexts in which language is used, and the conventions of particular communities all contribute to shaping linguistic patterns. Differences in cultural practices can lead to differences in the frequency and distribution of constructions, producing typological variation across languages. At the same time, shared aspects of human experience and cognition give rise to recurring similarities, creating a balance between diversity and commonality. The absence of absolute universals in language does not imply the absence of regularity. Instead, it reflects the multiplicity of factors that influence linguistic structure. Universals, in this framework, are not fixed properties but emergent tendencies arising from the interaction of underlying processes. These tendencies can be observed in the repeated paths of grammaticalization, the common patterns of discourse organization, and the shared constraints of processing and cognition.

Ultimately, the explanatory power of this approach lies in its ability to integrate multiple levels of analysis. By linking synchronic patterns to diachronic processes and grounding both in domain-general cognitive mechanisms, it provides a coherent account of how language is shaped and reshaped over time. Language is neither a static system governed by rules nor a chaotic collection of arbitrary forms; it is a dynamic system in which structure emerges from use and is continually modified by it. The conclusion that follows from this perspective is both modest and far-reaching. Modest, because it rejects the search for absolute, context-free principles that determine the form of all languages. Far-reaching, because it situates language within the broader domain of human cognition and social interaction, revealing it as an adaptive system responsive to the conditions of

its use. In this system, change is not an anomaly but a fundamental property, and the structures we observe are the provisional outcomes of processes that are always in motion.

Thus the study of language leads not to a fixed set of answers but to an understanding of ongoing processes. The forms that appear stable today are the products of past usage and the seeds of future change. The categories that seem discrete are the result of gradual differentiation. The patterns that recur across languages are the traces of shared mechanisms operating under diverse conditions. To grasp language in this way is to recognize its persistence not as rigidity but as continuity within change, and its variability not as disorder but as the expression of a system that is constantly adapting to the demands placed upon it.

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